

THE CAPTURE OF THE GOLDEN STALLION



RUTHERFORD G.
MONTGOMERY



GEORGE
SPURKE

THE CAPTURE OF The Golden Stallion

RENDAN

SCHOOL

By RUTHERFORD G. MONTGOMERY

THREE KINDS of hoofbeats ring through this book: those of the ranch horse who works for man; those of the wild horse who refuses to be tamed; and those of the great horse who will work *with* man, but never *for* a master.

This is a story that takes you into the high country where spring comes late into the canyons and where the cow ranges border the timbered foothills and the wild herds come up from the desert to graze precariously in the far meadows.

On one of those upland ranges, Charlie Carter discovered the palomino colt and at once wanted him fiercely, more than he had ever wanted anything before. Then the colt effortlessly put ten lengths between himself and 'Trey Spot, Charlie's swift mare, and Charlie had to go back to the Bar L to plan his campaign. Little did he guess how many months would pass or how important to him those months would be before he could have his chance to ride and tame the beautiful wild horse.

In that time Charlie found excitement and danger, faced a grueling test of spirit, and met disturbing changes in his life with his father and mother on the ranch that would some day be his. In that time, too, Ellen Sprague came from the East to visit the Bar L and Charlie learned that a girl could be fun to have around, especially when she could ride like Ellen.

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FAMOUS HORSE STORIES



ST. BRENDAN SCHOOL





THE CAPTURE OF
The Golden Stallion



Golden Boy bored in savagely

RUTHERFORD G. MONTGOMERY

THE CAPTURE OF The Golden Stallion

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE GIGUERE



GROSSET & DUNLAP

Publishers, New York

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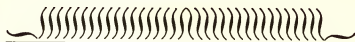
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ST. BRENDAN SCHOOL

For
JOHN KIRK MONTGOMERY







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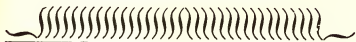
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THE CAPTURE OF
The Golden Stallion



Patric broke into a dead run



1. The High Country

JUNE was in the high country. In the blue sky a great thunderhead rolled up back of Sleepy Cat Mountain. The black underside of the cloud made the mountain stand out clearly, like a white cat lying against a black basalt ledge. Above the timber line, Sleepy Cat was still buried deep under winter snow. Later the mountain would shed its white coat and become a gaunt gray cat silhouetted against the sky.

Charlie Carter drew a deep breath of the thin, cold air. This was the first day of summer vacation, the first day back at the ranch after a winter in town with only week ends in the mountains. He had started it off by getting up before daybreak. With the sun only an hour above the eastern ridges, the tall, sandy-haired boy, mounted on a gray horse, was well up in the spruce belt close to the snow line.

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The object of his early ride was a renegade silvertip, a bear with a price on his head because in his old age he had turned to stock killing. Hibernation the fall before had saved him from the wrath of the Bar L riders. Charlie had helped hunt the killer, and had been the last to trail him. He had followed him through a blinding snowstorm into a canyon, where the big fellow had disappeared for the winter.

Now Charlie was headed again for that canyon. He was sure the killer was still holed up there. But he should be breaking out of his winter quarters very soon. It might be possible to locate the den, now that the snow line was retreating.

Charlie was riding Patric, because Patric was deaf as a stone and did not mind having a rifle fired over his head. He was the best horse on the ranch for saddle shooting, and he was sure-footed, a good climber, with speed when he had to have it. Since Patric's deafness had retired him to a pack-horse job, he was usually handy when needed.

Now Patric was taking it easy, standing humped over after the fashion of a pack animal, his head lowered, while Charlie studied the slopes above. Charlie's eyes rested on a mass of anemone blossoms stirring their blue bells close to a snowbank. He smiled eagerly as he watched the blossoms bob and nod. He'd take a big bouquet of them home to his mother. How many times had they gathered anemones early in the spring! Rousing Patric, he headed around the slope, toward the mouth of a canyon which opened like a blue slash against the green of the spruce, twisting upward to form a dark vein upon the whiteness above the timber line.

The odds were against his meeting the killer on his first trip to the canyon, but the last few days had been hot, as hot as any summer days, so there was a chance the silvertip had wakened. It would be great luck if the killer picked Charlie's first day of vacation to step out of his cave.

When he reached the mouth of the canyon, Charlie gave his attention to the ground along the muddy stream boiling down from the snowbanks above, to make sure the bear had not left the canyon. Seeing no tracks, he pushed upward. As horse and rider moved along, the canyon narrowed, and snow lay close to the trail.

Charlie let a gloved hand drop to the butt plate of the .300 Savage he had shoved into the boot under the saddle flap. The .300 was big enough to stop a silvertip, even at long range. He was glad he had taken it instead of the usual saddle carbine. With the trail narrowing, and the walls crowding in on each side, he'd need a heavy rifle if he met the silvertip. A bear just out of hibernation can be a nasty customer, especially an old silvertip weighing over six hundred pounds, who has come to think of himself as king of the trail.

Patric did not care much about going up the canyon. Being a mountain-bred animal he knew that high country canyons are treacherous during the late spring. With great banks of wet snow hanging from the ridges above, ready to break loose at the slightest disturbance and plunge down the cliff faces, the trail below might easily become a deathtrap.

Charlie looked up at the ridges above. A few slides had run but not many. He could see the bench where

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he figured the bear had denned up during the snow-storm. He could see the ledge on the first bench above the canyon where he had had to turn back. That ledge led straight to the bench, flanked by cliff walls.

The winter winds had drifted snow steadily over the ridges above until the banks stood deep, extending out like white cliffs. Some of the combs were fifty feet in thickness, and many of them showed ragged cracks where the snow had broken away from the cliff walls as the drifts softened and settled. Charlie remembered the warnings he had heard so often—never fire a rifle, never shout, never loosen large boulders, go carefully and silently if you have to pass through such a canyon as this during slide time. His father would never have allowed him to ride up the canyon. Charlie grinned. He wasn't a boy given to disobedience, but he had to know where that silvertip had holed up.

For several moments Charlie sat on his horse staring up into the canyon. The air was cold, and Patric seemed anxious to return to the warmth of the familiar range. Here in the canyon mouth the breaths of horse and rider were visible in the dim coolness. The boy shivered, but it was not altogether because of the chill air. The narrow canyon, the deep silence, and the horse's restlessness seemed ominous. He was about to turn back, but the thought that the bear might be only a matter of a few yards up that canyon finally overcame his own sense of caution, his father's warnings, and Patric's reluctance. He entered the canyon and rode forward.

It was less than ten minutes later that he spotted the dark object moving on the bench above, near where the canyon boxed in abruptly and ended against

a wall of granite. Charlie pulled Patric to a halt and sat watching, his heart pounding, until he was sure it was the bear and not a bull elk. The old silvertip was moving down out of the snow country.

Charlie eased the .300 out of its boot and slid the block back to make sure there was a cartridge in the breech. Patric lowered his head, snorted, and looked back down the trail hopefully. Charlie laid the rifle across the saddle, nestling it in his lap as he watched the bear.

The silvertip was following the ledge and would pass along the same rim where Charlie had trailed him the fall before. He was plowing along through the wet snow, pausing now and then to scoop up some and swallow it. For a few days he would eat snow and drink water, but would not eat much food.

Charlie decided he'd have to chance a long-range shot when the bear reached the closest point above him, otherwise the killer would gain the heavy timber below, and disappear. The .300 was deadly at four hundred yards, and Charlie figured the range wouldn't be over three hundred. It was a long shot but he had made longer ones. In his excitement he forgot about the snow danger; all he could think of was the chance he had to bag the silvertip.

The bear moved along the rim without bothering to keep under cover, and without paying attention to anything except the route he was following. Old and surly, his sides gaunt and stripped of the summer fat he had carried when he entered his den, he was in no mood to be stopped in his march toward his summer hunting grounds.

Charlie raised the rifle and tested the sights by

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bringing the front bead down on the bear. At such range the silvertip looked very small, the front bead covering his entire shoulder. Charlie held the bead close to the shaggy back where it humped up above the shoulders. He ought to wait until the bear was directly above him, but the tense excitement inside him was building up and might start his arms shaking. While the ivory front bead was steady he had better fire. He squeezed the trigger firmly, and the rifle bucked as it roared sharply. The report thundered upward, rolling along the rims above. The bear halted, then turned and faced down the slope. Even in his savage mood the silvertip knew what the crack of a rifle meant.

Charlie worked the lever fast because he knew he had undershot his target. Before he could fire again, however, the silvertip had plunged out upon the big bank of snow jutting from the rim above. And then Patric came to life with a suddenness that made a second shot impossible. Whirling, the horse leaped forward and charged wildly away. As he fought to get a tight rein Charlie saw the snow above start to move. It seemed as though the whole ledge were moving. The old bear clawed frantically as his footing gave way. Charlie stopped fighting Patric and bent forward. Glancing back as his horse broke into a dead run, he saw the silvertip rise on his hind legs and lash out as though he meant to smash back the avalanche with his huge paws, then he appeared to leap into the air as the slide boiled up under him. A great roar, like that of a fast train, filled Charlie's ears, and the ground shook under Patric's flying hoofs. On the rim directly

above them a big pine jerked back and forth, leaned far over, and in that fleeting second whipped around and vanished. Charlie forgot about the bear; he forgot about everything except the effort Patric was making.

The horse strained every muscle as he plunged downward. Rocks and trees and dirty snow boiled over the rim, foamed and twisted and swirled, and shot downward. With one last desperate burst of speed Patric plunged out of the canyon a few seconds before the white death closed in behind them. But he didn't stop running until he was well into the timber.

Charlie sat staring back at the canyon while Patric heaved and blew in an effort to get his wind back. The boy's hand was shaking so badly he could not shove the rifle back into its boot. He was glad he hadn't dropped it, though he didn't remember hanging on to it. He had only a vague remembrance of seeing the bear tossed into the air, and then of seeing nothing at all but boiling snow.

The roaring in his ears had stopped, but there was a smell like burned sulphur in the air from the granite boulders which had been ground to powder by the avalanche. Charlie laid the rifle across the saddle in front of him. He got out his bandanna handkerchief and mopped his face. Then he just relaxed. He'd never dare to tell his father what had actually happened. Grandby Carter was a man who never took unnecessary risks. He would be angry if he knew his son had acted like a fool tenderfoot. But he could report the end of the killer, and he could tell his mother. Ann Carter would understand, because she, too, had a reckless streak in her make-up.



2. *A Pair of Heels*

CHARLIE's eyes dropped to a bank of snow which was shaded by a stand of balsam. Beside the bank a mass of anemones swayed in the breeze. Charlie laughed softly. Lifting the rifle, he shoved it into the boot and swung down from the saddle. He gathered a large bouquet of the flowers and tucked them into a saddle pocket, then sat down in the sun, tossing aside his hat.

No one would get the reward for killing the silver-tip, because there wouldn't be enough left of the bear to furnish a scalp. A chill stirred along his spine as he remembered how the white death had swallowed the bear. If Patric hadn't sensed the danger in time they would both have been crushed under thousands of tons of snow and rocks and broken trees.

Then Charlie got to thinking about the excitement he would stir up when he told the boys how the old bear had met his end. Later on he'd find enough of

the carcass to back up his story. He was hungry now and wanted to get home fast. He'd be very late because he couldn't push Patric, not after the way the horse had come through back in the canyon. He got up and recovered his hat, then mounted and headed for home.

Patric swung down through the aspen belt, and they came out on a ridge overlooking a wide valley. The buildings of the Bar L ranch stood near the lower end of the valley close to the timbered foothills. There were a rambling, two-story ranch house, built of logs and thatched with a shake roof, a new barn built of milled lumber, two large corrals, and a saddle house. The bunkhouse stood midway between the barn and the house. Back of the barn lay the winter feed lot with its hayracks and shelter sheds. The rest of the valley was fenced pasture where the white-faced cows were held with their calves until the high country range was ready. A smaller pasture took care of the saddle horses.

It was a familiar scene to Charlie. He had been born on the ranch and had grown up there, except for recent winters spent in town attending high school. He felt a thrill of anticipation as he looked down upon the sun-bathed scene. Yes, his story would stir up plenty of excitement.

Patric broke into a gallop as they headed down off the ridge into the cow pasture. He was eager for a feed of grain and hay. They swung past the horse pasture and Charlie whistled to Trey Spot, his saddle mare. She tossed her head and stood watching him, but she did not gallop down from the knoll where she was feeding. From now on he would ride Trey Spot and get her toughened up.

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He rode the last quarter of a mile along the ranch road, which was lined with tall poplars and big cottonwoods. A flock of blackbirds, perched high in the trees, were singing lustily. Occasionally a redwing would break cover and flash in the sunlight as it sailed down into the garden plot above the bunkhouse.

At the corral gate Charlie dismounted and stripped the saddle off Patric. He swung the saddle to the top rail of the corral because he would need it again when he caught up Trey Spot, and with a slap on Patric's rump sent him into the corral. The horse stopped just inside the gate and waited for his grain.

"All right, you sure have earned it," Charlie said. He was impatient to get to the house and tell about the death of the silvertip, but he got a nose bag of oats and slipped it over Patric's ears. He put the rifle in the saddle shed after running an oiled rag through the barrel. Then he headed for the house at a fast trot.

When he came banging into the kitchen there was nobody there. The sink was stacked with unwashed dishes, and the kitchen looked as though his father or Tex had served breakfast. As he stood looking at the disorder he remembered the anemones he had picked. He dashed back to get them, but some of the good spirits had gone out of him. He had expected to find his mother in the kitchen.

He walked more quietly when he entered the house again. There was no one in the dining room or the living room, so Charlie went upstairs and turned toward his mother's room. She was probably in there making up the beds. He was almost at his mother's door when his father stepped out, blocking his path.

Grandby Carter looked at his son with unsmiling seriousness.

"I wouldn't go in now," he said.

"Why not?" Charlie asked. At this hour his mother would be up and busy.

"Dr. Crittenden has ordered her to rest."

"What's wrong?" Charlie asked quickly.

"She needs rest," his father said shortly. He moved past Charlie and started down the stairs.

Charlie stood holding the blue flowers, looking at his mother's door. He wanted to rush in to her, but the grimness of his father's face, and the way he had spoken, made him hesitate. He had practically been told to stay out of the room.

Turning about, he walked slowly down the stairs. He hadn't known his mother was sick, she had been cheerful and happy the night before when he arrived home from school. He looked at the bouquet of anemones and felt a childish urge to crush the flowers. But he didn't; he got a vase and put them into it, then set them on the stand where his mother kept her mending.

Walking out into the kitchen he stood looking at the dirty dishes. He wasn't hungry now, and he didn't care whether he told anyone about the death of the killer. Getting a glass of milk he sat down at the kitchen table to drink it. If only his father had said she had a cold, or a headache. But just to say she had to rest and that he couldn't see her! Charlie shoved his empty glass from him and got to his feet. When things went wrong there was always one way to meet the trouble—he could saddle Trey Spot and go for a long ride. That usually straightened things out.

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As he walked across the field to the corral he told himself that his father's frowning countenance did not necessarily mean a thing. Grandby Carter was an undemonstrative man. The years of struggle to save the ranch had taken their toll. He loved his wife with a deep, abiding love, but much of his irritation when things went wrong was taken out on his son. He never had found the time to understand the growing boy. With the years an unnatural aloofness had grown between the two. Charlie's mother had watched the rift develop, and she had found herself helpless to bring father and son together in the orbit of her own love.

It had always been Ann the expert horsewoman, the reckless Ann who took chances, who had shared Charlie's secrets, who had taught him to ride and had camped out with him. He thought of her not only as Mother, but the way he imagined he'd feel about a sister if he had one. Beside a campfire they had always been able to talk things through, while his father sat back in the shadows smoking his pipe, saying very little, and then only when he was asked for his opinion.

Charlie kicked a stick off the path. He looked toward the corral and saw no one. He wondered where his father had gone. Tex and the boys were riding fence, but his father should be around if Mother was sick. He didn't go into the barn looking for him, however; he got a bridle and headed for the pasture.

Trey Spot let Charlie catch her. She was a high-strung, nervous animal and liked action, of which she had had very little with Charlie in town. She nickered gently to him when he patted her neck. Charlie grinned. He was very proud of Trey Spot. The slender black mare was the prize horse of his string, and Charlie was

a horse lover. Trey Spot was as much a person to him as anyone he knew.

He had picked her from the colt crop three years ago, and his judgment had been good. Trey Spot had won the big race at last year's valley rodeo. It was the first time a fifteen-year-old boy had ever won that race. Every rancher and cow hand in the district had entered a horse. Trey Spot had breezed in two lengths ahead of the field.

The boys at the Bar L had judged the mare only fair, too slender-barreled, too light in the legs, but Charlie had been sure she would win. Even his father had tried to prepare Charlie for defeat, so he would not be too bitterly disappointed. Tex Malone, the ranch foreman, and Shorty Spears, the horse wrangler, had secretly bet on a Lazy Y entry. But they took their loss cheerfully when Trey Spot won for Charlie and the Bar L.

Charlie saddled Trey Spot at the corral and rode away from the ranch without seeing his father. Heading across the valley he rode up through Roaring River Canyon. Roaring River became a placid, meandering river as it crossed the home valley and curved around the ranch buildings. But it boiled through the narrow canyon, where it had cut a deep slash in the face of the mountain into which the sun did not penetrate.

Breaking out of the canyon, Charlie was glad to feel the hot sun on his back again. He had followed Horse Thief Trail out of the gorge and was now on a high bench. The trail got its name because it had once been used by rustlers who stole horses and shoved them up the canyon and over the divide.

Trey Spot snorted and jerked her head up impa-

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tiently. Her nostrils flared as she tested the air of the park they were entering. Trey Spot always fancied herself a wild horse when she got into virgin country above the home range. She wanted to run, but Charlie wasn't in the mood for racing.

He felt uneasy and wanted to think. He held his mount to a walk and drank in the cool, thin air, spiced with balsam and aspen smells. They were entering the aspen belt, but there was a scattering of conifers on the rocky knolls. Far above, Charlie could see the dun-colored shapes of two elk. They stood watching the approaching horseman, ready to break for the timber, but not too much worried. They were cows, and cows seemed to know hunters would not shoot them.

There was another reason for moving at a leisurely pace. Tex Malone had sighted a herd of wild horses up near Bear Pass, which he figured had come up from the desert to the south. If the herd was a big one it would cut into the range grass supply needed for the range cattle the Bar L would be moving into the high pastures very soon. Charlie planned to scout the herd and stampede it back over the pass. Some ranchers and a few horse hunters rounded up the wild ones and sold them for dog meat, but Charlie loved horses too much to allow even scrubs to be sent to a slaughterhouse. Tex would be rough on them, so Charlie wanted to handle them himself and in his own way.

On a ranch like the Bar L, where all of the saddle stock was sired by a purebred stallion, scrubs were not looked upon with favor. Wild stallions, even the hammerheads with no points at all, would steal valuable mares, and when the mares were finally rounded

up they would have worthless colts or fillies at their sides. According to Tex, the way to handle an invasion of wild horses was with a rifle or a call for the meat hunters.

Charlie pulled Trey Spot to a halt where a stand of alder and willow pushed a green finger out into the park. He raised himself a little in his stirrups so he could look over the willows. A familiar scene presented itself in the meadow.

Unaware of his arrival, the furred and feathered folk were busy enjoying the sunshine. A fat yellowbelly whistler sat on a rock, his reddish fur gleaming in the sun, one eye cocked toward the meadow, the other toward the sky above. A dozen other chucks fed in the tall grass. Close by rose a castle of jutting rocks, and each had a nest under one of the loose stones. Like their cousins the woodchucks, they were fat, quilly animals.

Mingling with the whistlers were many chipmunks, some of them tiny fellows, others of the golden mantle variety with round potbellies. The little chips dashed about in nervous haste; the fat ones sat and looked out over the grass. The high country summer was so short that the dwellers had to make use of every minute to add a bit of fat or to store a cache of seeds against the long winters.

Charlie liked to watch the meadow folk. Sitting quiet and motionless was the way to see them, but he had a job to do. He was about to let Trey Spot have her head when a gray shape appeared back of a rose briar at the edge of the meadow. At first he saw only movement, grayish movement, then he picked out the shape of a coyote.

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The little wolf crouched low as he watched the chips and the whistlers. His red tongue licked out over his lips, and his eyes stared unwinking but eager. Charlie carried a .25-35 saddle carbine in the stirrup boot but he did not reach for it. He felt no desire to shoot the little marauder. He was so much a part of the great outdoors that he felt a kinship for the coyote. Anyway, the gray ones kept the jack rabbit crop down, and that meant better grass.

He also wanted to watch the contest of wits he knew was coming. All of the cunning was not with the little wolf, though he was smarter than the whistlers and often dined on a quilly one. Now he edged forward carefully, aiming to get between the whistlers and their rock castle. Hardly a spear of grass wiggled as he moved forward.

The coyote's strategy seemed about to be rewarded. The sentinel on the rock had his back to the invader, and the others, even the chips, were depending upon him to warn them of approaching danger. Charlie could tell by the way the coyote bunched his legs under him that he was getting ready to spring.

Suddenly the sentinel cocked his head on one side and looked up into the sky, then he blasted a shrill whistle. Instantly there was a wild scramble of furry bodies as all of the animals dashed toward the rock castle. The sentinel stayed on the rock long enough to blast a second warning before leaping away, bounding through the grass like a round red ball.

The coyote stood up, disgust written on his face. Charlie looked up into the sky and saw a large hawk diving down upon the meadow. His wings were held

close to his sides, and he was splitting the air in a power dive. When it seemed he must plummet into the ground he spread his wings and banked sharply out across the tops of the grass.

Charlie touched Trey Spot with a spur and rode out into the meadow. Instantly the little wolf faded into a thicket. His movement was so swift that he would have gone unseen if Charlie hadn't had him spotted. The boy chuckled to himself.

"That's the way it goes, lady," he said to Trey Spot.

She shook her head and broke into a trot. They swung along the edge of the meadow for a half mile, then entered a strip of timber.

From the cover of an aspen grove Charlie examined the next meadow. At the upper end were two horses. He had located the wild herd. Now he must work carefully to learn how many there were. They would be off the moment they sighted him, or got his wind. Checking the breeze he swung Trey Spot deeper into the grove.

He did not need to ride close to the herd, but he wanted to get a view of all of them, in order to check for ranch mares gone wild. So he headed for higher ground. Moving in a wide circle he reached a wooded knoll overlooking the park where he had seen the two horses. He halted in a spot where he could watch without being seen. Now all he needed to do was to sit still, and keep Trey Spot from sounding off.

He turned the mare so she would not see any of the horses. The two he had first spotted were quietly feeding below. They were small animals, typical wild mares, and fat, which meant that they had a leader who kept them on good pasture. A third horse appeared, then

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others moved into view. They stayed close to cover, and gave every evidence of being wary and watchful. With meat hunters scouring the open country on horseback and from light planes, wild herds led a dangerous life. The light plane usually spelled doom for a herd as it could be used for driving as well as spotting.

Charlie counted eighteen horses, and decided that was the size of the herd. He waited, hoping that their leader would appear, and a moment later the boss of the herd broke cover from high ground at the far edge of the meadow. He was a big stallion with a shaggy red coat, a real horse in spite of his scarred and battered appearance. He had a long head, a wide chest, and a savage manner which told Charlie he was looking at a horse that would never be broken. He was ugly, but there was a strange, primitive beauty in his powerful body.

As he watched the big stallion, Charlie knew why this herd had escaped the meat hunters. The leader had intelligence and heart. Charlie could not help admiring the horse, in spite of his ugliness and certain bad temper. Here was an invader the Bar L would have to reckon with if he weren't chased off the range. A number of the mares carried brands, which meant that they had been stolen from ranches.

Charlie did not break cover as he had at first planned. The stallion was smart and might not head for the pass unless he were approached from the right direction. Also, Charlie wanted to watch the rugged leader as long as he could. He had an idea the big red horse might do the herding himself.

Trey Spot got wind of the band before they reached

the spot which Charlie had selected as the point for starting the drive. She tossed up her head and whinnied loudly before Charlie could jerk her bit to stop her. Instantly the stallion whirled and stood staring at the woods where Trey Spot was circling. Then he laid back his ears and screamed savagely. Charlie giggered Trey Spot sharply with the spurs and sent her galloping out of the woods. He shook out his rope and stood up in the stirrups, swinging the rope and yelling.

The stallion lunged at the nearest mare and slashed at her rump with his teeth. Instantly the whole band bunched and fled toward the pass. Trey Spot picked up speed and began closing the gap between herself and the herd. Charlie let her have her head because he wanted to give the stallion a real scare.

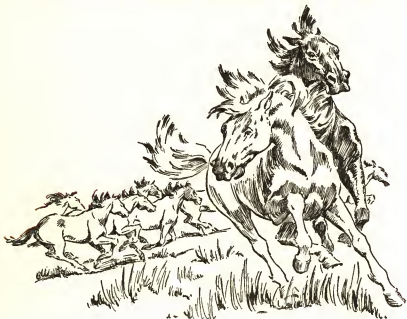
He was close upon the heels of the screaming leader when suddenly another horse broke out of the timber. The instant Charlie saw him he forgot all about the stallion and his mares. The newcomer was a colt, golden yellow in color, like the color of cream atop a crock in the spring house. His mane and tail were blond, and they flowed in the wind like spun gold. The instant he appeared, the leader of the herd swerved and charged toward him.

Charlie knew the old veteran must have driven the youngster out of the herd, but probably the colt was not quite ready to strike out for himself. He was staying close to the mares he had grown up with.

The colt swerved when the stallion charged at him, and the leader quickly turned back to the mares, his scream ringing like the blast of a siren. Charlie pulled Trey Spot around and headed after the golden colt.

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The youngster was heading into the open, straight up the park. Charlie grinned eagerly as he swung his rope. The desire to own him had been born the instant he had caught sight of the young horse. He had never wanted anything so much as he now wanted that colt.



The colt swerved when the stallion charged

He was the most beautiful thing Charlie had ever seen, with his sleek coat gleaming like burnished copper in the sunshine.

Charlie urged Trey Spot on, and as she raced after the colt he began to consider how he would handle him once he was roped. Suddenly he became aware that

Trey Spot was not overhauling the other horse. The golden streak up ahead was actually running away from the mare, and doing it with an ease which was effortless. He didn't seem to be exerting himself at all. It wasn't the extra weight Trey Spot was carrying; she was just badly outclassed by the wild horse.

By the time the colt reached cover at the pass he had pulled ten lengths away from the mare, and was adding insult to injury by slowing down to a lope. Charlie pulled Trey Spot up and let her blow. She shook her head and sent an eager whinny after the golden colt. He answered her from the timber above. A moment later he appeared on a jutting point. He stood with his head held high, staring down at the mare and her rider. Then with a defiant whinny he was off after the herd.

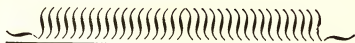
As Charlie slowly coiled his rope, the surprise on his face changed to a thoughtful smile. He decided to change all his plans for the wild herd. He would not follow them. He wouldn't haze them over the pass. He'd let them stay until he had caught the colt. It was only a small herd and would not do too much damage to the range.

He urged Trey Spot into a lope. As he headed home he began to think about his mother, and the nagging worry, temporarily dispelled by the sight of the wild horse, returned. He now had so much to talk to her about, if they would let him see her. He knew he had never before seen a horse like the colt he had left behind. Not even Trey Spot gave him the feeling of exaltation that he had had at sight of this horse. He had admired the big stallion, knowing he could never be gentled, but he knew the colt could be gentled, that he

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would make a great saddle animal. He had run away from Trey Spot without half trying, and Trey Spot was the champion of the valley.





3. *Plans*

CHARLIE swung stiffly out of the saddle at the gate to the home corral. A brilliant sunset was fading overhead, the red fires had cooled, and blue dusk was shrouding the river bottom. He was ravenously hungry, and he was weary. Every joint ached protestingly. It seemed an age since his early morning adventure in the canyon. He had just taken on too much for a first day's riding. Added to his weariness was his gnawing worry about his mother.

Eager as he was to get to the house, he did not go until he had rubbed Trey Spot down, grained her, and made sure there was plenty of timothy hay in the feed rack. He was just turning toward the house when Shorty Spears stepped out of the barn. He grinned at Charlie.

"Bit off quite a chaw fer the first day," Shorty remarked.

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"I sure did," Charlie agreed as Shorty dropped into step beside him. "I'm hungry as a bear."

"Don't mention bears," Shorty said. "I'm the official bear killer of the Bar L. Got appointed couple of days ago."

"The silvertip?" Charlie asked, and had to smile.

"I'm the hound dog that's got to trail him." Shorty looked at Charlie and shook his head. "Been out after him already. You know that canyon where you trailed him last fall?" There was something in Shorty's voice that made Charlie look at him sharply.

"Sure, what of it?" he said.

"Slides ran up there today, and dogged if there wasn't hoss tracks coming out of there. Looked to me like somebody high-tailed it out ahead of a slide at a fast clip." Shorty spoke carelessly.

Charlie halted and faced Shorty. The horse wrangler's eyes were twinkling, and a big grin was spreading over his face.

"You don't think any of the Bar L gang would be that foolish?" Charlie asked, and his grin matched Shorty's.

"Reckon not," Shorty replied. "Must have been some tenderfoot."

"The tenderfoot got away, but the slide got the old silvertip. Along about July we'll go up there and find some of him," Charlie said.

"We better find some of him soon or I'll be bear hunting all summer," Shorty said grimly, then he shook his head. "Won't you never learn nothing?"

"Guess not," Charlie said.

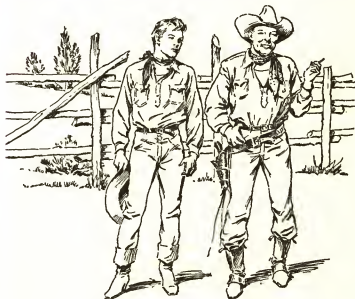
"How'm I going to convince Grandby without some of that bear?" Shorty asked.

"You just back me up," Charlie said. "I was watching from a safe spot, waiting to get a shot."

"Sure. Like you should have been," Shorty added.

They started on up the path. Charlie knew he could trust Shorty. He had known the wrangler ever since he was three years old, when Shorty had drifted in and asked for a job on the Bar L. His name was really Albert Ernest Spears, but only a few people knew it. To everyone he was Shorty Spears, a sawed-off, bowlegged little man with a wrinkled red face who wore the biggest Stetson he could buy.

Shorty went in through the front door, but Charlie went around to the kitchen door because he was anxious to have a word with his mother if she was up and



Charlie could trust Shorty

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getting supper ready. He stepped into the kitchen and halted. A big, rawboned woman stood at the stove forking steaks from a skillet to a platter. She turned and smiled at Charlie.

"Hello, Charlie," she said.

"Good evening, Mrs. Garrity," he said, and his heart sank. His father had gone out and gotten Mrs. Garrity to take care of the cooking and housework. Once before, when his mother was down with the flu, Mrs. Garrity had come over to work at the ranch. The boy remembered those two weeks as the longest of his life.

"Get washed up. Supper is ready," Mrs. Garrity said cheerfully.

Charlie went into the washroom off the kitchen and scrubbed up grimly. He wanted to ask Mrs. Garrity about his mother, but he was afraid of what she would tell him. Tossing the towel over a bar, he walked through the kitchen and into the dining room.

Everyone was seated at the table. His eyes went straight to his mother's place. She was seated beside her husband, and was laughing at something Shorty Spears had said. Charlie let his breath out slowly, and when she turned her head he grinned eagerly.

"Charlie," she said, "where have you been all day?"

Charlie felt suddenly free and happy enough to shout. The knots inside him loosened, the tired feeling was gone. "I covered a bit of country," he replied shyly as he sat down beside Tex Malone.

His father frowned at him. "You're not making a very good start," he said gruffly. "There's still some ranch work to be done around home before you gallivant all over the country."

When Grandby Carter spoke that way Charlie usually bristled, but tonight it did not bother him. He was too eager to tell what he had seen.

"I checked on the wild herd. That's ranch work," Charlie said.

"Locate them?" Tex asked.

Charlie nodded as he took a large steak off the platter with his fork. "There's a golden colt with them, a honey."

"No!" Shorty exclaimed. "Not a sure-enough palomino?"

"Hundred per cent," Charlie said with a wide grin. "And he outran Trey Spot ten lengths over three quarters of a mile." He paused to let that sink in.

Ann Carter leaned forward. "Ten lengths?" she asked breathlessly.

Grandby looked at her and frowned. "Now Ann, that's nothing to get excited about."

"It is," she said. "He must be a wonder horse."

"Reckon I better round him up and race him this fall," Shorty remarked.

"He's my horse. I spotted him," Charlie said.

"How many in the herd?" Carter asked.

"Twenty. Eighteen mares and a tough old boss who is some horse himself, and the palomino." Charlie looked from Tex to Shorty. "Remember, I got my name on the golden colt."

"If he's as good as you say, he must be branded. He's probably a stray," his father said.

"He's never had an iron on him," Charlie replied. "He grew up with that band, and now the big red stallion is trying to run him off."

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"This red stallion," Carter questioned. "Will he give us trouble?"

"I'm afraid he will," Charlie admitted. "He's bigger and heavier than Kelly, and he's as smart as he is mean. But I liked him."

For the first time Grandby Carter smiled. He was grim and serious about most things, but he loved horses. Like Charlie he admired a horse with heart and courage, even if he did have to fight him.

"You know we're clearing up the range so we can run mares in the upper pasture," he said. "Will a fence stop this fellow?"

Charlie looked his father in the eye. "No. A fence won't stop him. He has at least five branded mares in his herd right now. I saw one Lazy Y."

"Then what would you suggest?" He put it squarely up to his son.

"I'll make it so hot for him he'll stay on the south side of the pass," Charlie replied.

Tex didn't say anything, but there was a glint in his eye. He knew how he would handle the brute. He'd use his saddle carbine and save a lot of time and energy.

Charlie caught the gleam in Tex's eye. "Don't do any shooting until I've had a chance," he begged.

"That's right," agreed his father. "That's an order, Tex."

"And while I'm at it I'll catch that colt," Charlie added.

His mother leaned forward eagerly. "I'd like to see that big red horse."

Carter turned to his wife and laid a hand over hers. "Now, Ann, he's just a battered-up scrub."

"You know Charlie's description of him reminds me of Big Red," Shorty said thoughtfully. "But if it was the stallion he'd be getting old now."

"Did he have a cropped right ear and a white diamond in his forehead?" asked Mrs. Carter eagerly.

Charlie looked at his mother. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement. Her husband's face was stern. He didn't like the way the talk was drifting.

"A white diamond, but more of a slit than a crop ear," Charlie said.

Ann patted Grandby Carter's hand gently. "I'm not getting excited, but Charlie did see Big Red."

"Could be him," Tex admitted. "He did have a slit ear, not a crop. But Hackett and his crew have rounded up every wild horse south of the pass."

"Big Red is too smart for a butcher like Hackett," Mrs. Carter commented.

"Could be he's been down in the desert," Shorty said. "Got plumb dry down there last year, could have been he had to move." Shorty grinned broadly. "That big hammerhead chewed up a rope horse for me once and came near to stomping me into the ground. He's one hoss I never want to dab another rope on."

Charlie looked at his mother. He had never seen Big Red until today, but he had heard a lot about him. He was more than just a wild stallion, he was an outlaw, and there wasn't a rancher on the south slope who hadn't lost mares to him.

"I doubt very much if it is Big Red," Carter said, frowning.

His wife smiled at him. Charlie knew they were remembering the time they had both joined a drive to

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capture the wild horse. It had very nearly ended in tragedy for Ann. Charlie had been away at school then.

"I would know him," Ann Carter said. There was wistful eagerness in the look she gave her husband. He did not speak, but shook his head.

Charlie sensed something between them, something he did not know about. He was thinking that it would be fun to ride up to the high benches with his mother and let her see the big horse. She would certainly remember exactly what the renegade looked like. She had been closer to him in the drive than any of the men. The great red horse had chosen to break through the circle of riders at the point where she was riding.

"I'll never forget the way he whirled and charged when he saw that he could not save his harem," she said softly. "I sent Diamond straight at him. I think he would have smashed us both if he hadn't seen me. He just leaped past us and was away."

Carter always laughed unbelievably when his wife told that story, but she believed it. He held that Big Red was just smart.

"That brute knew when it was best to cut and run," he said. "Diamond might have flattened him. Diamond was big and tough himself."

Charlie smiled at his mother. He agreed with her, because he knew few men ever got to know horses as well as Ann Carter. They had talked about it a number of times, and they both felt the same way about Big Red.

In the excitement over the horses, Charlie completely forgot about the silvertip. Shorty was willing to let it pass. He wanted a piece of bear hide to back him up

when the subject was raised, and he didn't want to be the one to let Carter know his son had taken foolish chances.

After supper the boys went to the bunkhouse and Mrs. Garrity climbed up to the spare bedroom. Grandby Carter lighted the fire in the big stone fireplace and filled his pipe. Ann sat with her mending basket in her lap.

"Thank you for the bouquet," she said as Charlie sat down on a stool beside her. "Where did you get them?"

"Up Sleepy Cat way."

His father glanced at Charlie in surprise. He seemed to doubt his statement. "Shorty was up that way," he remarked.

Charlie nodded. He decided not to tell his father about the bear. It might be best just to wait and bring in some evidence later on. His mother would believe him without any proof, but his father would be skeptical. It made him uncomfortable to feel that way about his father, but he couldn't help it.

His mother took a letter out of her mending basket. She didn't open it, but sat looking at it. Then she glanced at Charlie, but spoke to her husband. "I had a letter today from Connie Sprague," she said.

Connie Sprague had been an Eastern classmate in Ann Carter's school days. Charlie had often heard his mother speak of Connie. Carter drew on his pipe and nodded his head without speaking.

"Connie and her husband are spending the summer in Europe. She wondered if she could send her daughter out here while they are away."

Charlie had lost interest in the letter. He was think-

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ing about the wild colt and laying plans for catching him. Then he heard his father ask, "How old is the girl?"

"Ellen is about Charlie's age, possibly a year younger."

Charlie blinked and looked at his mother. He suddenly realized that this did concern him after all. He'd probably have to teach the girl to ride and let her tag along with him wherever he went. It would interfere with his plans for catching and breaking the colt. He wouldn't have too much spare time as it was, and if he had to waste it on a girl, he might lose the colt. The idea made him scowl.

"You'll like Ellen." His mother smiled at him.

"I don't know whether having a visitor is a good idea," Carter said. "You're supposed to take it easy."

There it was again. Charlie decided to ask his mother what it was all about. But he wanted to spike the visit idea first.

"She probably wouldn't like it out here," he remarked.

His mother just smiled again and tucked the letter back into her mending basket. Carter stretched his legs out toward the fire. "I take it you've already written and asked the girl to spend the summer with us."

"I sent off an air-mail letter today and suggested that she come out on the train with Harriet Hansen. They go to the same school in Boston." She paused, and looked at her husband. "I'll enjoy having her around the house. After all, I won't be riding much this summer."

"She's welcome, of course," he said hastily.

Charlie got to his feet. He couldn't argue with his mother, and something kept him from making any fur-

ther protests. If she couldn't ride, she would be lonesome. It hadn't occurred to him that she would not be riding Diamond into the hills every day.

He moved across the room and stood looking up at the log-beamed ceiling. The logs had seasoned to a golden brown like the natural wood walls. The big room was filled with a soft reflected light. Everything in it except the richly brown woodwork was gay and bright. Everything there spoke of the gay, artistic and high-spirited nature of his mother. He looked at her and saw that she was laughing at him. He grinned and walked over to her chair. There just couldn't be anything wrong with her, not anything serious.

"Guess I'll turn in," he said. It had been several years since his mother had kissed him good night, but now he felt an urge to bend down and kiss her. He didn't do it. Instead, he turned and walked toward the stairs.

"Good night, Charlie," she called after him.

"Good night." Charlie went up the stairs and along the hall to his room.

Downstairs, Ann Carter looked at Grandby. "I think we should tell him."

"No," he answered. "Crittenden advised against it."

"But he senses something wrong," she said.

"I doubt it." Grandby got to his feet. "His head is so full of that wild colt he can't think of anything else."

"But a heart ailment isn't necessarily serious, Grandby. You heard the doctor say so."

"We're not taking chances," he said gently. "If Crittenden is worried, that's enough to scare me."

She smiled at him. It had been years since he had displayed so much sentiment toward her. She had always

been sure it was there inside him, but he never showed it.

"I'll be very careful," she said.

Carter yawned and stretched. Then he took his wife's hands to help her rise from her chair.

"Time we followed Charlie to bed, Ann. It's lots of rest for you from now on, my dear," he reminded her.

"Please, Grandby, just a little while longer," pleaded Ann. "It is so cozy here by the fire, and I feel like a talk tonight, dear. Do you realize that it is just twenty years ago this spring that we came to the Bar L?"

Grandby Carter sank back into his chair again, but he kept hold of one of Ann's hands. He was silent as his thoughts swept back over those twenty years to the spring he had brought his bride to this range in the shadow of Sleepy Cat.

Three years before he had bought the Bar L. It took every cent he had saved, plus what his father had left him, and he had gone into debt to buy his herd and saddle stock. Some difference between this Colorado lay-out and the big Texas empire where he had been foreman in the old days. He sighed heavily and Ann squeezed his hand.

He turned to look at the slender woman beside him. She seemed almost as pretty as that first day he had met her in Denver. Her hair was still the color of bronze with the sun on it, and her eyes the same blue-green.

Ann smiled at the tall, somber man and remembered the tense, slow-speaking, black-haired Texan she had seen for the first time at her father's house in Denver. That winter after her return from school in the East he had come to arrange for the delivery of a herd from the

Circle Dot. It had been love at first sight between them, even though her father had warned her that "men who keep everything locked up inside them are hard to live with."

Well, her father had been wrong. It had not been hard to live with Grandby Carter, even though money had been scarce and misfortune persistent. And the misfortunes that dogged the Bar L had left their mark on the man. What once had been silence became taciturnity. What had been tolerance became impatience with those who failed to live up to his own high expectations, especially those he loved.

From the first moment she had seen the valley of the Bar L, nestled against the grim backdrop of the Sleepy Cat, she had loved it. She had loved the long rides across the range and up the canyons with her tireless husband. With the exception of the year Charlie was born, she had spent hours in the saddle almost daily, riding alone or with Grandby. It was a lonely life, but she loved it. Neighbors were scarce and she seldom got to town. But her father sent her books and the first radio in that part of the state, powered by wet batteries. No, the years had not been hard for her except for the pain of Grandby's growing sternness and quietness. Even the inheritance of her father's estate, which had made things easier on the Bar L, had not seemed to lessen Grandby's demands upon himself.

As she held her husband's hand there before the fire she could feel the tenseness that never seemed to relax any more.

"Charlie wasn't overenthusiastic over Ellen's coming, was he, dear?"

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"It's time the boy grew up," replied her husband soberly.

"Oh, it seems to me that he is growing up all too swiftly. It makes me want to cry to see him act so grown-up and self-controlled. His colt years were rather trying, I must admit, but now—"

Grandby interrupted. "I wish he would take on a little more responsibility around the place," he muttered. "When I was his age I was in charge of a cattle drive."

"It's only natural for a boy to play, dear," Ann said softly. "It makes me sad knowing that you never had any years to play. I think you would understand Charlie better if you had known how to play when you were a boy."

Carter rose suddenly and moved a step nearer the hearth so that Ann's hand lost contact with his sleeve.

"I've a hard day coming up tomorrow, and it's late. Besides, I want you to get your rest."

Ann rose and stepped close to her stern-faced husband. "I've loved tonight here with you by the fire, darling. Will you promise me something, Grandby? Will you try to be as patient with our son as you are always with your 'ailing' wife?"

Instead of answering his wife's question, he stooped, kissed her silently, and then walked out into the kitchen for a drink of water.





4. *Early Fall*

CHARLIE was up early, his head full of plans. But when he glanced out through his window, he lost some of his high spirits. A cold, high country rain was drizzling down, the sort of rain which would be snow up on Sleepy Cat Mountain. He dressed and went downstairs. Mrs. Garrity was bustling about in the kitchen getting breakfast ready. His father was seated at the table in the dining room.

Charlie sat down without a word. Grandby Carter looked at his son with the cool appraisal he might have used in considering a new ranch hand. Mrs. Garrity came in with a pot of coffee.

"Morning, Charlie," she said cheerfully.

"Morning, Mrs. Garrity." Charlie smiled at her. She was a fussy, motherly sort of person. The down on her upper lip seemed to be trying to develop into a mustache. She poured coffee into their cups.

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"Cakes and sausage coming up," she said.

Mrs. Garrity bustled away just as the door opened and Shorty entered, followed by Tex. They tossed their hats on the floor by the door and sat down, their high heels rapping smartly on the floor.

"When the rain breaks, you and Shorty can work on the corral," Grandby Carter said to Charlie. "Tex and I will ride the upper fence."

"I hoped I could ride up over Horse Thief," Charlie remarked.

"Your mother has you spoiled," replied his father coldly. "From now on you'll have to do your share of the work around here."

Charlie started to say the corral was in good shape, except for a couple of posts which needed replacing, but he didn't speak. He was conscious of an increased tension between himself and his father. He wondered if it had anything to do with his mother's having to rest so much. He couldn't see how his father could blame him for that.

"No job that needs two men. I can handle it myself," Shorty commented.

"Charlie will help you," Carter said shortly.

Mrs. Garrity appeared with a platter of cakes in one hand and a bowl of sausages in the other. She beamed on the men as she set the dishes down.

"Shore look good to me," Shorty smiled up at Mrs. Garrity. She flushed and started wiping her hands on her apron.

"You and your blarney," she said, but it was clear she liked Shorty's praise.

Charlie looked at Shorty and he winked back.

Charlie grinned at the thought that Shorty might be shining up to the widow. She would make two of Shorty, he guessed, but Shorty loved good food, and Mrs. Garrity certainly could cook.

After she had left, Tex cocked an eye at Shorty. "First thing we know we'll be looking for a hoss wrangler."

"I'm a ranny who appreciates good vittles," Shorty said complacently.

Even Carter smiled at that remark. They started eating and from then on until they had finished there was no more talk. Shorty and Charlie left the house together and hurried down to the saddle house.

Before he ducked indoors Shorty looked up at the gray sky. "She'll break in another hour," he said. "We'll hustle those posts in and you can be on your way."

Charlie sat down on a box and gazed into the drizzle. Shorty had always looked out for him. It was funny but he had a feeling that Shorty understood him better than his father did. Shorty was rolling a cigarette. The yellow drawstring on the muslin tobacco sack was gripped between his teeth with a round tag hanging down over his chin. He gave the string a jerk and the bull on the tag bounced upward. Shorty tucked the sack into his shirt pocket and deftly rolled his smoke. When it was going well he squinted at Charlie.

"Your mother would sure like to take a peek at that wild hoss," he remarked.

"She'll probably ride up with me soon," Charlie said.

"Shore," Shorty said. "Shore." He didn't talk any

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more about it, he just sat smoking and looking out into the rain.

As Shorty had predicted, the rain stopped within an hour and the clouds drifted away except around the head of Sleepy Cat. Up there a real snowstorm was adding new whiteness to the peak.

They went to the barn for shovels and bars, then dragged the heavy posts around from the pile back of the barn. Working the old posts out was the biggest part of the job. With a post out, there was a hole already dug for the new one. They set one post and spiked the rails to it, then moved on to the second one. Just as it was finished, a big convertible drove into the yard.

The car was low and sleek and painted a bright yellow. Its driver was a slender young man, possibly a year older than Charlie. He pulled up near the corral gate and leaned over the door.

"I say, you," he called to Charlie.

Charlie sank the bar into the ground and looked the car over, then turned his attention to the driver. He didn't think he cared for what he saw. "Speaking to me?" he asked without moving.

"Who else?" the young man retorted.

Shorty hung the hammer over the top rail by its claws. "Reckon you must be lost, young feller," he said. "How'd you come to get away up here?"

"This is the Bar L, isn't it?" the young man at the wheel asked impatiently.

"'Less somebody changed the brand it is," Shorty replied. He jerked his head toward Charlie. "And this is Charlie Carter."

"Well," the young man said as though he doubted it. "I didn't come up here to see the Carters, I came up to see Miss Ellen Sprague. Isn't she staying here? I'm Dean Bailey from Cedar Bank."

Charlie grinned. He remembered having seen Dean in town. His father had recently purchased the general store. He let his eyes slide over the car. Cars didn't interest him much. He wouldn't trade Trey Spot for two convertibles like the one Dean was driving. He walked over and stood beside the car.

"She hasn't arrived yet," he said. "Do you know her?"

"No. But I heard in town that a pretty tenderfoot was coming and I decided I ought to know her." He gave Charlie a wise look.

"I'm sure she'll be pleased," Charlie said.

Dean nodded his head. "I feel sorry for her, being stuck in a place like this all summer with no place to go."

"Plenty of places to go," Shorty commented. "Plenty of good horses to ride." He looked at Charlie and jerked his head toward the corral. "'Bout time for us to ride up to the calf pasture and check on them wolves."

"Wolves!" Dean exclaimed.

"They eat quite a few calves. We sort of have to keep watch." He looked at Dean with a worried frown.

Charlie did not know what Shorty was driving at, but he knew he was ribbing Dean.

"I'd like to ride up with you if you have a spare horse," Dean said quickly. He opened the door and

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got out of the car. He was wearing a white shirt and tan slacks which were immaculately creased. Charlie looked down at his stained Levis. He was beginning to get a glimmer of what Shorty had in mind.

"Be good training for you," Shorty said. "When that gal arrives she'll want to go riding."

"That's right," Dean agreed. "I'm a bit rusty on horse riding."

Charlie looked into the corral where Trey Spot, his mother's Diamond and several other horses were standing at the feed rack. Diamond was feeling pretty lively because Ann Carter had not ridden him much lately. He was the sort of horse she would ride, a spooky animal, with a nervous, high-strung temperament. Shorty was looking at Diamond, too.

"He can ride Diamond," he said.

Dean looked at the big sorrel a bit apprehensively. "Is he trustworthy?" he asked.

"Oh, sure," Shorty assured him. "He's a woman's horse. Mrs. Carter rides him all the time."

"Yes. He's my mother's horse," Charlie said.

"I can handle a man's horse," Dean remarked. "But if he's all you have . . ."

"Guess he'll have to do," Shorty said. He exchanged glances with Charlie.

Charlie was ready to go along with the idea. He didn't like Dean Bailey—not that he cared if Ellen Sprague did go riding with him in the car or on horseback. If Dean took her off his hands it would be all right with him. It might solve one of the problems which had been worrying him.

The horses were wet and cold from the rain. When

Shorty slapped a saddle on Diamond, he humped his back and rolled his eyes. Even Trey Spot fidgeted a little when Charlie jerked the cinch tight. Shorty held open the corral gate. "We'll mount 'em in here," he said.

Charlie knew Shorty did not want to chase Diamond if he got away from Dean. Dean took the reins Shorty held out to him. He pulled them around Diamond's neck, then caught hold of the saddle horn. Diamond snorted at the crude approach. Like any good saddle horse he sensed when a man was a green hand. Dean heaved himself upward. Diamond lowered his head and snorted again. Dean jerked hard on the reins and Diamond's head came up. His back humped at the same time.

"Why, you brute," Dean shouted, and sawed on the bit.

Diamond's head went down and he made two short jumps, then landed stiff-legged and pitched once. Dean sailed over his head and landed in the wet litter, face down. Shorty started to laugh. He slapped his leg and leaned forward. Charlie hadn't intended pushing the joke that far. It was the first time he had ever seen Diamond unload anyone. He moved in quickly to help Dean to his feet, and as he started brushing off the stained slacks he looked up. Grandby Carter was sitting in his saddle at the corral gate, his face as black as the underside of a thundercloud.

"Do you consider this amusing?" he asked. His eyes held Charlie with a cold stare.

"I guess not," Charlie said.

Shorty started mumbling something about a job



Dean sailed over his head

he had to do in the barn. He made off fast, leaving Charlie to face his father. Dean had wiped the dirt out of his mouth. He gave Charlie a dirty look.

"Your mother's horse," he said, sarcasm in his voice.

"Diamond is my mother's horse."

"Were you looking for me?" Carter asked. "I'm Grandby Carter, the owner of this ranch."

Dean looked up at him and his manner changed. "I'm Dean Bailey, sir. My father runs the store in town."

"I've met him. I apologize for my son, as he does not seem to be man enough to do it himself. I'll find you some clean clothes."

Charlie flushed. Anger swelled up in him. He looked at his father, then turned and caught up Trey Spot's reins.

"Where are you going?"

"The corral is fixed," Charlie said. "I'm going up over Horse Thief Trail."

"Strip off that saddle and take Bailey up to the house. Outfit him with some of your clothes." Carter swung down from his horse.

Silently they walked up to the house, but at the front door Charlie faced Dean Bailey. "I'm sorry," he said.

Dean frowned, but he stuck out his hand. "Forget it, Carter. I got taken in, swallowed that stuff about wolves."

Charlie shook hands with him. He still didn't like Dean Bailey, but now he thought he could get along with him. His mother sat at the window. Dean paused when he saw her and glanced down at his muddy shirt and slacks.

"I want you to meet my mother. Mother, this is Dean Bailey," Charlie said.

Ann Carter got to her feet. Her eyes were dancing as she faced Dean.

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"He met with an accident," Charlie explained.

"I'm happy to know you," Dean said, and flushed.

"I saw everything from the window," Ann said. "I must apologize for Diamond."

Suddenly all three were laughing. Ann had made them see the funny side of the affair. Dean seemed to be able to take a joke, even if it was at his expense. He was clearly impressed by Ann Carter's slender beauty. She looked more like a girl than like Charlie's mother when she laughed that way.

"I'll rustle some clean clothes," Charlie said. "You can come up to my room to change."

When they came downstairs Dean was dressed in one of Charlie's new shirts and a pair of his school pants. He bowed before Ann Carter and smiled at her.

"Thank you for having me in, Mrs. Carter."

"You must come again," she said with a smile.

"Oh, I will. I have to come over and see your Eastern visitor," Dean said.

Mrs. Carter lifted her eyebrows. "How did you find out about her?" she asked.

"Mrs. Hansen told me about her. She suggested Ellen might get lonesome out here." Dean smiled. "But I guess she'll find plenty of excitement. Charlie will probably let her ride Diamond."

Charlie grinned. "Diamond will be her horse if Mother says the word."

"Of course she is to have Diamond," said his mother.

Dean colored slightly. He didn't have much to say on the way down to the car. But he shook hands again with Charlie.

"See you later," he said as he stepped on the starter.

As Charlie watched him drive away, he knew he'd never be able to trust Dean Bailey very far. Dean had an idea he was a pretty important person; he had as good as said Ellen Sprague would fall for him on sight. Charlie kicked a stone aside.

Shorty came out of the saddle house. He pushed his big Stetson to the back of his head and surveyed the barnyard carefully.

"Looking for wolves?" Charlie asked, and grinned.

"Never saw Grandby so mad in a long time," Shorty said. "Reckon I'll just make myself scarce around here. I'm off after bear if he asks." He headed for the corral fast.

Charlie reflected on what Shorty had said. Anger stirred inside him as he remembered his father's words and the way he had looked when he said them. Of course he wouldn't go for a practical joke, but he didn't have to lay it on so thick.

By this time it was too late to ride into the high country range, so Charlie busied himself by replacing several sagging rails in the corral fence. His father came out of the barn and walked past on his way to the house. He didn't stop to speak to Charlie, and Charlie kept his back turned. He wasn't going to make the first move. No matter how his father felt, he was determined to find time to catch the palomino colt. The more he thought about it, the more important the task seemed to be.



5. *Ellen Sprague*

ANN CARTER insisted that Charlie go in with his father to meet Ellen and bring her to the ranch.

"I'd go, but the ride is tiring." She looked at her husband, her voice trailing off. He nodded grimly. Charlie frowned but did not argue. Every time he tried to talk to his mother about herself she changed the subject.

"Harriet Hansen rode as far as Omaha with Ellen. She stopped over to visit her aunt there, so Ellen will be alone," Mrs. Carter said. "You'll be at the station when the train arrives?"

"We'll be there, but there's nothing in Cedar Bank to frighten a girl," said Carter.

"It's her first trip West." She laughed. "The Lazy Y boys might take it into their heads to stage a show for the tourists on the train."

Charlie grinned. The Lazy Y spread was close to town, and Bill Mullen's boys had been known to revive the Old West for the benefit of Easterners aboard the limited.

"If she rode all that way with Judge Hansen's daughter, she will know all about the town," said his father.

"Harriet does talk a lot," his mother admitted. "But the Eastern school may have tamed her a bit."

Charlie and his father left Ann Carter seated on the porch in the sun. She waved at them as they drove away in the old Buick. Carter wasn't interested in cars. The old car's upholstery was so worn there was no reason why the back seat should not be used as a truck to haul supplies for the ranch. It suited Charlie, too. In spite of its age the Buick handled the steep grades leading up to the pass with ease. It was a means of getting in and out of town quickly.

They reached Cedar Bank long before the train was due because Grandby Carter had some purchases to make at Boone's Hardware Store. Charlie went into the store with his father. Boone's was more than just a hardware store, it was a harness and saddle shop, with a bench in one corner where Tull Grimes made hand-tailored boots. It was also the hangout for cow hands, ranch owners, and town loafers. There was a crowd in the back of the store when the Carters entered and lively talk was going on.

Carter nodded to the men, then turned to the counter, where Boone was jotting down a few items in his want book. Charlie paused to look at a new gun Boone had on display.

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"When you bringing that plane in, Hackett?" a Slash T cow hand asked.

Charlie turned from his examination of the gun and looked toward the back of the store. He did not know Hackett, the meat hunter, but he had heard plenty about him.

"Soon as Buck Kent gets it fixed up," Hackett was a chunky man with a red face. He was smoking a cigar as he lolled against a rack of saddle blankets.

"This is a tough country for a plane," another man said.

Hackett waved his cigar in a half circle. "Buck Kent can fly through a barn door," he said. "I've flown up canyons and in between stands of spruce with him. He gets the meat every time."

"Got a herd spotted?" the Slash T man asked.

"Yeah," Hackett answered. "Been after a bunch down on the desert. There's a big red stud with a bunch of mares. He's a tough old cooky, but I know how to handle him." Hackett grinned broadly. "Buck will cut him out into the open and I'll knock him down with a rifle. Once he's out of the way, the rest will be easy."

"Shoot from the plane?" a cowboy asked.

"Easy," Hackett said. "Buck will dive in on him and I'll let him have it."

"Sounds like a sporting deal," a lank cow hand commented as he got to his feet. "Sounds real sporting." He stood with his hands on his hips looking at Hackett, then he turned and his high heels clicked as he walked out of the store.

Hackett laughed loudly. "It's business with me,"

he said. "Big business." He puffed on his cigar. "I'm doing the ranchers a good turn, getting wild horses off the range."

Charlie turned back to the counter. He would have liked to tell the lanky cowboy that he agreed with him, but the man had stalked out so fast he hadn't had a chance to say anything to him. He didn't know the cow hand but thought he'd like him. He was angry and upset because he hated meat hunters. A moment later he was even more upset as Hackett said:

"I figure I'll locate that herd up near the head of Horse Thief Trail. Don't know how many there is in it, but there ought to be plenty because that red stud is a smart one."

He was talking about Big Red and his herd. If they made a drive up there and shot Big Red, the palomino colt would join the herd and be driven over the pass and into the desert where Hackett's men and the plane could easily run them down and corral them. He felt like telling Hackett to keep away from the head of Horse Thief Trail or he'd get into trouble. He wanted to walk up to the meat hunter and ask him how he'd like to have a few .30-30 bullets slammed through that plane the way he planned to treat Big Red.

He was staring toward the back of the store when his father set a big package on the showcase beside him. "Put those staples and nails into the car. I'll be out in a minute."

Charlie picked up the heavy package and took it out to the car. He shoved it onto the floor in the back, and slammed the door. Now he knew he'd have

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to work fast and get the golden colt roped and off the range.

His father came out of the store and stood looking up the street. "That blowhard," he said.

"He better keep off the Bar L," Charlie said.

Grandby Carter looked at him. "You keep your shirt on," he muttered. "Hackett will be saving us a lot of trouble." He got into the car and Charlie climbed in beside him.

They pulled in at the railroad station five minutes before train time. Getting out of the car, they walked around to the platform. Charlie's anger cooled quickly. His father was in a better mood than he had been for several days. Boone had given him a cigar and he was puffing on it.

When the train whistle sounded around the bend below town, Charlie backed away from the tracks and stood near the door of the station. Ike Zimmerman, the agent, bustled out, blinked down the tracks, then adjusted his spectacles.

"On the button," he said as he consulted a silver watch he had pulled from his pants pocket.

Charlie nodded, even though Zimmerman wasn't speaking to him. He looked down the tracks and watched the swaying locomotive as she bore down upon the station. The engineer blasted a warning as the engine neared the road crossing below town. There was a hissing of steam and a grinding of brakes and the engine slid past with its bell jangling. The engineer lifted a gloved hand to Ike. The baggage cars rolled past and then the coaches. When the train ground to a halt the Pullman cars were opposite the

station. Grandby pushed forward into the crowd but Charlie hung back.

He had never seen a picture of Ellen Sprague, and he wasn't interested in girls. He certainly wasn't prepared for the girl who stepped down from the Pullman. She had corn-colored hair and very blue eyes. He had only a quick look at her as his father stepped forward and took her hand. Then Charlie shoved toward them without even realizing he was doing so.

"This is Charlie," his father said.

She gave him a quick smile. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," Charlie answered, and he knew he wasn't going to mind teaching her to ride, or riding with her.

"Take Ellen to the car," Grandby Carter directed. "I'll get her baggage."

They walked to the edge of the platform and she stopped and stood looking up at the mountains which towered above the valley where Cedar Bank nestled.

"It's wonderful," she said. "More wonderful than I had imagined."

"You're looking right at the Bar L," Charlie told her.

"It's up there?" Her eyes grew bigger.

"Not right on top. In a high valley."

"I can hardly wait." She turned to Charlie. "Mother told me so much about your mother. She must be wonderful."

"She is," Charlie said. "She hasn't been feeling so well and couldn't come in."

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"I'm sorry. Has she been ill long?" Then she added quickly, "I don't want to worry her."

"You won't." Charlie didn't explain any further because he didn't know just what to tell Ellen.

Grandby Carter came out with a small trunk on his shoulder. "You better get the suitcases," he said, handing Charlie two baggage stubs.

When Charlie got back to the car his father was roping the trunk to the rack on the back of the sedan, and smiling at Ellen.

"One thing you learn on a ranch is how to rope a pack," he said.

Charlie put the two suitcases in the back seat. When he started to get in with them, Ellen asked, "Can't we all ride in the front seat?"

Charlie waited for a gruff refusal, but it did not come. He looked at Ellen and said, "Guess we can manage."

They got into the car and started out of town. Charlie was glad they didn't have to stop at the general store for supplies. If they had, he would have had to introduce Ellen to Dean Bailey.

"You've already had a visitor who drives a new convertible," Charlie remarked.

"Who could it have been? I don't know anybody out here," Ellen said.

"It was Dean Bailey. His father owns the general store," Charlie said.

At that moment four cowboys galloped up out of a draw. When they came in sight of the main street they whooped and sent their horses down the road at a mad gallop. They were Lazy Y boys in to do up

the town. Ellen was sitting next to the window. She leaned out eagerly.

"Oh!" she cried. "Those beautiful horses."

Charlie grinned. She hadn't been interested in Dean and his new convertible; she liked horses. When she turned back to him she had forgotten all about her visitor in the yellow convertible.

"Do they always ride like that?" she asked.

"Only when they're coming into town for some fun," Grandby Carter replied gruffly.

"We have a horse for you that makes those look like scrubs," Charlie said.

"You think I can learn to ride?" she asked anxiously.

Charlie caught his father's sidewise glance. There was an amused glint in his eyes.

"Sure you can," Charlie answered, and flushed in spite of himself as he remembered how he had crabbed when his mother suggested that he could teach Ellen to ride.

As they climbed upward, Ellen exclaimed about everything. She was awed and excited by the mountains. "But they don't seem to get any closer," she commented.

"It's the clear air," Charlie said, and was tempted to tell her the yarn about the tourist who shucked off his clothes and got ready to swim in a mountain brook, because he had been walking for hours trying to reach the mountain he had thought was just a short distance away.

"You've lived here all your life?" she asked.

"I was born on the Bar L," Charlie said.

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Ellen turned to Grandby Carter. "How did you ever happen to start a ranch up here?"

The older man considered this for a minute. The grim lines around his mouth softened. "I took a girl riding one day. We drifted over a pass and into a valley. We just decided to stay."

"The girl was named Ann?" Ellen said.

Grandby Carter nodded and gave his attention to the sharp curve ahead.

"So you built a big house and moved a lot of cattle into the valley," Ellen said.

"No." Carter smiled. "We built a one-room cabin and a corral. We had two saddle horses and twenty head of cows but no bull. The first winter was a tough one. We lost seven cows, but that spring we managed to buy a bull and six more cows."

Charlie glanced at his father. He had never heard him tell about the beginnings of the Bar L before. But he knew the story because his mother had told him about those first years of bitter struggle.

"You were real pioneers," Ellen said with a sigh. "I guess it couldn't happen that way any more."

"Charlie will inherit a going ranch some day," Carter said. Was there a note of sourness in his voice?

Ellen didn't seem to notice. They were entering the aspen belt now and the foothills were covered with stands of white-barked trees whose restless leaves never seemed to be still. They were pale green and made the hillsides look bright.

"Quaking aspens," Charlie said. "We call them quakers."

Ellen nodded and then said soberly, "They quake

because the Cross was made of aspen wood. I read that somewhere, and now I believe it."

Charlie looked at the quakers and thought Ellen must be right. They always seemed to shudder whether there was a breeze stirring or not.

There were a lot of things Charlie wanted to tell Ellen. But with his father sitting back of the steering wheel, grimly watching the road, he could not bring himself to tell her about the palomino colt or about Big Red and his herd. He made up his mind he'd show her Big Red and the colt as soon as she learned to ride.

By the time they had crossed the pass and were headed down into the valley, Ellen knew that the Bar L had over fifty horses and close to a thousand head of white-faced Herefords; that in the early days Ann Carter had ridden the range with Grandby the same as any cow hand. The Eastern girl had a way of getting information, and she was so enthusiastic about this country she was seeing for the first time that even Grandby Carter volunteered information. As they were rolling down the tree-lined lane toward the house she exclaimed:

"I'd like to live here!" She looked at Charlie, then lowered her eyes.

Carter chuckled. "You're going to live here all summer," he said.

Ann Carter came down the steps smiling and waving as the car slowed at the front gate. She came around the car and held out her hands to Ellen.

"You're just as I expected Connie's daughter to be," she said as she kissed her young guest.

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For a minute Ellen stood looking shyly at Ann, then she said, "And you are just as beautiful as Mother always said you were."

Mrs. Carter laughed. "Connie always was a bare-faced flatterer." She slipped an arm around Ellen. "We'll go inside and leave the men to wrestle with your baggage."

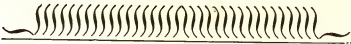
They walked up the steps and Charlie stood watching them. Ellen was almost as tall as his mother but the resemblance ended there. Ellen's hair was blond; his mother's the color of burnished bronze. His mother was slim and looked frail, while Ellen was the picture of robust health. It was the first time Charlie had noticed how frail his mother really was. She always seemed to have such a store of vitality that no one ever realized she didn't have a strong body to go with it.

"Lend a hand with the trunk," Grandby said abruptly. Charlie had an idea his father might be having thoughts like his own as he watched the two women walk into the house.

They carried the trunk and the suitcases up to the spare room. Mrs. Garrity had moved into the sewing room, which was never used. His mother and Ellen came up, laughing at some story Ann Carter had been telling about her own and Connie's school days.

"I'm dying to see all of the clothes Ellen brought with her," she said. "It's so wonderful to have a pretty girl in this house!"

The men walked down the stairs and Charlie went out into the yard. He let his eyes rest for a long time on the outline of Sleepy Cat Mountain. He had an idea that this was going to be the best summer ever on the Bar L.



6. *Rope Hand*

HIS FATHER and mother were talking on the porch outside the window of the room where Charlie was eating breakfast. Charlie was struggling with a problem of his own, so at first he paid no attention to what they were saying. He wanted to teach Ellen to ride, but he knew that if the palomino colt was to be his he had to get up in the hills and catch him before Hackett started his drive. The words outside the window finally began to register in his consciousness, however, and made him forget his own problem. Grandby Carter seemed to be angry.

"It means hiring an extra man," he said.

"We can afford it, Grandby," Ann murmured gently.

"He takes it all for granted. He ought to buckle down and begin to take more interest in things." Carter spoke impatiently.

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"Charlie is only a boy." His mother's voice was soft, coaxing. "Ellen is our guest, and Charlie should be allowed enough time to make sure she enjoys her stay."

"At his age I was riding herd for twelve dollars a month."

She laughed. "And it didn't hurt you a bit. But there is no need for Charlie to go through what you went through."

"Well," Grandby Carter said, and Charlie knew his mother had won her point, "I'll fix it so he can have some time off."

Charlie got up from the table quickly. He didn't want them to know he had heard. He went out into the kitchen and on through the back door. Mrs. Garrity called after him. "What's wrong with your appetite, Charlie? You've only had one stack of pancakes."

He paused and grinned up at her from the bottom step. "I'll make up for it at noon," he said.

She shook her head but her face broke into a big smile. "She's enough to upset anybody's appetite."

Charlie felt his cheeks begin to get warm. He turned and headed down the path toward the barn. His father was just ahead of him. He stopped at the saddle house, getting his saddle off the rack.

"Catch up one of the brood mares for Ellen to start on," he said. "You'll have to look after her and see that she gets around. With your mother—well, you'll have to take the responsibility—"

"She may not want to ride much," Charlie said.

For a moment there was a glimmer of humor in Grandby Carter's eyes. "She'll be just like your mother,

in the saddle every day." He caught his saddle by the horn and started toward the corral.

Shorty was at the corral when Charlie tossed his saddle over the rail. Carter had saddled up and left while Charlie was selecting an outfit for Ellen. Shorty grinned at Charlie.

"You're a lucky dog," he said.

Charlie was annoyed. First Mrs. Garrity, now Shorty. "You won't have to teach her to ride, so you're the lucky dog," he snapped.

"Be glad to take over that chore for you," Shorty offered good-naturedly.

"Garrity wouldn't like it," Charlie said and grinned in his turn, knowing he had evened the score.

Shorty pushed back his hat and leaned against the gatepost. He chewed a straw thoughtfully while Charlie opened the gate and whistled to Trey Spot. Diamond walked over to them with the mare. He was cagey but bored by the weeks of inactivity and he would have welcomed a long, hard ride. When Charlie started saddling Trey Spot, Diamond snorted in disgust and walked away.

Charlie rode up into the horse pasture. He pulled up to watch the brood mares and their colts. He had a gentle old mare in mind for Ellen. She wasn't a plug, but she was past her skittish days. For the last two seasons she had failed to mother a foal. When Charlie rode up to her she didn't bother to duck away from him, she just stood still and let him slip a hackamore over her head.

Charlie started back across the pasture with the mare on a lead rope. There was no use in trying to

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hurry her. She was willing to move at a slow trot, but would not go any faster.

They had reached the middle of the meadow when Charlie saw a rider coming toward him at a fast gallop. He blinked a couple of times, then pulled up and sat watching. The horse was Diamond, and the rider was Ellen Sprague. She was letting Diamond have his head, and he was pounding toward them at a reckless gallop. Charlie pushed back his hat and started to laugh.

When Ellen pulled up beside him, she was flushed with excitement. "What a wonderful horse!" she said. "And I like a Western saddle."

Charlie saw she was riding his mother's saddle and that Diamond had on the silver-mounted bridle his father had given her as an anniversary present. Ellen was even wearing his mother's spurs. He grinned at her.

"So I'm to teach you to ride," he said.

Ellen laughed. "I was afraid riding a Western horse in a Western saddle would be different from riding a bridle-path horse." She shook her long bob back over her shoulders. "Of course, we didn't always obey the rules. Sometimes we used to race each other."

"Diamond is a bit rugged at times," Charlie said. He was remembering what had happened to Dean Bailey.

"Your mother said I was to have her outfit. She told Shorty to saddle up for me." Ellen leaned forward and patted Diamond's neck.

Charlie felt a sudden tightening inside him. His mother wasn't expecting to ride much that summer. Then he looked at Ellen, and was glad the outfit would be used by someone who rode almost as well as his mother.

"How would you like to trade horses?" he asked. "I'll ride Diamond and you can ride Trey Spot. She's the fastest horse in this valley." He paused, then grinned. "I mean the second fastest horse."

"Which one is the fastest?" Ellen asked.

"A golden colt we're going to catch," Charlie said.

"A wild horse?" Ellen asked eagerly.

"A wild horse," Charlie answered, and turned to slip the hackamore off the head of the old mare. As they rode back to the corral he told her all about Big Red and his herd and how the palomino colt had run away from Trey Spot.

"Will I get a chance to see them?"

"I'll take you up there just as soon as my father gets another hand to help with the calf crop."

"I'd like to ride with you when you work the range," Ellen said.

"It's hot and dusty and plain dirty work," Charlie replied.

"I want to do everything, just the way your mother said she used to do," Ellen said.

Charlie nodded, but for a moment he didn't say anything. They rode up to the corral, where they found a grinning Shorty just getting ready to leave. He squinted up at Charlie.

"Some teacher," he remarked.

"You took a chance putting her on Diamond," Charlie said.

"Mrs. Carter came down to the corral with me," Ellen explained. "I told her I had ridden a great deal back home."

"We'll switch saddles and horses," Charlie said. "Then we'll ride up to the big pasture."

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"I want to learn everything—how to rope a calf and things like that," Ellen said.

Charlie grinned at her as he swung her saddle up on Trey Spot's back. "Trey Spot is an expert rope horse. All you have to learn is how to toss a loop."

As they rode toward the cow pasture, Charlie kept looking up toward the canyon where Roaring River entered the valley. If he did not have to work they might be able to make a quick trip over Horse Thief Trail.

The cow pasture extended for a mile north and south and for three quarters of a mile east and west. It was the biggest pasture Ellen had ever seen.

"I never dreamed there was such a big pasture. Is it fenced in?" she asked.

"Five-wire fence all around," Charlie told her proudly.

They were entering a ravine through which a small stream twisted between willow and alder clumps. There were a few groves of aspen trees on the hill-sides and along the bottom. As they rounded a willow patch the horses halted abruptly. In the trail ahead of them stood a white-faced bull. He was a short yearling and he had his head down as he pawed at the turf. His angry bellow echoed across the gully.

"What's the matter with him?" Ellen asked.

Charlie looked at the bull and saw the quills in his lips and muzzle. The yearling had gotten fresh with a quill pig.

"He mixed with a porcupine," he said.

Ellen leaned forward. "The poor thing. Will he let us pull them out?"

Charlie laughed. "Yes," he said. "He'll let us pull them out."

He moved Diamond a couple of yards to the left so that he could study the bull from a better angle. The animal was in a rage from the pain of the quills which were working slowly deeper into his flesh. His muzzle was inflamed and swollen, which meant that the quills had been embedded for some time.

Suddenly Charlie was aware that Ellen had swung down from her saddle. She was wearing Levis and a bright plaid riding shirt. When she descended to the level of the bull's eyes he bellowed and shook his head. Trey Spot leaped back because Ellen had not dropped the reins to ground-hitch her, and she stood alone, facing the bull. For a moment Charlie did nothing. Her action was so foolish that it completely stunned him. What was she thinking of, dismounting in the face of an angry bull, even though he was just a yearling! Ellen realized that she had made a mistake, but instead of running to Charlie she turned and started back down the trail after Trey Spot, thinking she could catch the mare and mount.

The bull shook his head again, and then he charged straight after Ellen. Charlie came to life in a flash. He set his spurs and swung Diamond around, shaking out his rope as the horse whirled. Diamond knew what to do—he plunged forward as Charlie swung his rope. There wasn't time for a nice balancing of the loop, but Charlie swung it out and flexed his wrist, and the loop dropped neatly over the head of the bull. Charlie spoke to Diamond as he took a hitch around the saddle horn. Diamond slowed, then sat down, snapping

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the rope taut. The bull's head went down and his hindquarters came up. He was flipped neatly and landed with a thud on his side.

Charlie was out of the saddle instantly. He went down the taut rope and landed on the head of the bull. With



The bull charged straight at Ellen

his head pinned down, the bull couldn't get to his feet. He lay kicking and twisting, but he couldn't get up. Charlie looked up to see Ellen standing down the trail staring at him. Her face was very white, and she lifted her hands as though to shut out some terrible thing she had seen. Charlie grinned at her.

"Lesson number one," he said. "Never go near a range bull on foot, especially not one with his whiskers full of porky quills."

"Why did Trey Spot run away from me?" Ellen asked.

"You must always drop the reins to the ground. If you leave them wrapped around the horn, your horse will think you want her to go on home. That's probably what Trey Spot has done."

"What are you going to do with the . . . bull?" Ellen was still standing well down the trail.

"I can't pull the quills out without help," Charlie said. "And I can't sit on his head much longer—he's really getting riled. You better climb up the bank and hide while I get back to Diamond."

"You won't get caught?" Ellen asked.

"No," Charlie said. "Diamond will see to that."

Ellen hesitated a minute, then turned and ran up the slope. When she had vanished into a thicket, Charlie slid off the bull's head and ducked back to Diamond. The horse kept the rope tight, and Charlie was in the saddle before the bull knew he was free. Charlie shook the loop loose as soon as the yearling had scrambled to his feet. He would have to get Tex or Shorty and throw the bull again so the quills could be pulled out with pliers. The bull was a valuable animal. Grandby Carter had paid five hundred dollars for him when he was just a calf.

Charlie coiled his rope as he rode up the slope to where Ellen was hiding. Now that it was over he felt shaky. He wasn't so good at snap roping, his average catch was one in three. This time he had been just plain lucky.

Ellen came out of the thicket and stood waiting for him. Charlie swung down and looked at her. There still was no color in her cheeks, but her eyes were sparkling.

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"It was wonderful the way you roped him," she said.

Charlie looked down at his scuffed boots. A pleasant thrill went through him, but he shrugged his shoulders. "I was scared stiff," he said.

"I guess I have a lot to learn. Walking back to the ranch will teach me a lesson." She smiled for the first time since the encounter.

"You don't have to walk. Diamond will ride us double. We'll go back and find Trey Spot before anyone sees her and gets to worrying; then I have to locate Shorty or Tex so we can pull the quills out of that bull." Charlie stepped back. "You ride in the saddle."

Ellen mounted and Charlie swung up behind her. Diamond didn't like the idea, but when Charlie spoke to him he behaved himself like the well-trained horse he was.

They rode back to the home corral with Charlie bouncing behind the saddle. Trey Spot was at the gate and so was Grandby Carter. He had his horse saddled and standing nearby but had not mounted because he saw them coming. He didn't smile when they pulled up at the gate.

"I forgot to ground-hitch Trey Spot," Ellen explained with a smile.

Carter's features relaxed. He had been worried, and would have been off looking for Ellen if he had had any idea where to look.

"There's a yearling bull with a face full of quills up on the creek," Charlie said. "One of the Wyoming bulls."

"How long has he been quilled up?" his father asked quickly.

"A couple of days, I guess. There's some swelling." Charlie had slid from Diamond's haunches. Ellen dismounted.

"We'll go up and pull them," his father said, and turned to the saddle house to get pliers and a tube of antiseptic.

They rode back to the pasture and located the yearling with his muzzle lowered into the cold water of a pool. Charlie shoved the bull out into a meadow but he was on the prod and wanted to fight. He kept facing Diamond and making passes at him. Charlie hoped his father would let him do the roping, but Carter wasn't thinking of anything but the valuable bull. He rode in and dropped a rope on the angry animal, then slid down the rope and pinned him. Charlie ran in and helped hog-tie the yearling.

Ellen did not get off Trey Spot, and she didn't let the mare move in close as Carter jerked out the quills and soaked the wounds with medicine. When the last quill was out he nodded his head to Charlie.

"Cut him loose."

Charlie loosened the ropes from the yearling's feet and stepped back. Grandby Carter eased off the head and moved quickly to his horse.

They sat watching the bull as he got to his feet. He did not seem to appreciate what had been done for him at all. With a bellow of anger, he lifted his tail high and charged away up the creek.

"Good thing you found him," Carter remarked. He was looking thoughtfully at Charlie. "I'd have sworn he had been roped and thrown within the hour. There were grass stains all over the shoulder."

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Charlie looked at Ellen. "I roped him and threw him," he said.

Ellen moved Trey Spot closer. "I didn't know about bulls," she said. "But I know now."

Carter gathered up his reins. He didn't ask for further explanations. "I'd better get on up to the branding fire," he said.

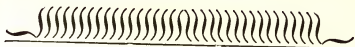
"We'll go up and lend a hand," Charlie said.

His father looked at Ellen inquiringly. She smiled at him. "I want to see everything," she said.

He rode away without a word, with Ellen and Charlie following him up the creek. They climbed out of the creek and onto a meadow where Tex and Shorty had a herd of cows bunched near a dead pine tree. Shorty was stirring up a branding fire.

Branding and ear-tagging calves was old stuff to Charlie, but it was exciting work for Ellen. Roping a calf and then flipping it on its side and holding it down looked easy, but she knew it required expert work. Some of the calves were husky youngsters who had been born in early March. There was a lot of dust and wild bawling, and the acrid smell of burning hair filled the air. At first Ellen cringed when Tex applied the hot iron, but she got used to it, even riding herd fairly successfully, since Trey Spot knew exactly what to do when a cow tried to break away from the bunch and escape with her calf.

At noon they ate a lunch Tex had packed on the back of his saddle and at four o'clock Carter called it a day and they rode back to the ranch, dusty and tired. Ellen's spirits refused to be dampened, however. She kept Charlie busy answering questions, and didn't stop until they were in the house.



7. *Big Red's Harem*

GRANDBY CARTER did not hire another man until after the calves had been branded. Meanwhile Charlie fretted and worried because he was not able to get into the high country. Each day he listened and watched the sky for a light plane, and when none appeared he felt a little better.

Later in the week Judge Hansen's daughter drove out to the ranch with Dean Bailey, and they took Ellen back to town for a week's visit with Harriet. Charlie was irritated by the way Dean played up to Ellen. She didn't seem much impressed, but Charlie kept thinking that Dean would be seeing her every day for a week, perhaps two weeks.

With Ellen gone and the calves branded, Charlie at last had his chance to go after the palomino colt. The morning after Ellen left, he was on his way be-

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fore daybreak. He had given the problem of capturing the colt considerable thought and he felt that he knew a lot about Big Red and his harem. He was sure Hackett wasn't going to get any place until he had shot the leader.

The mares didn't stay with Big Red because they loved him; they stayed because he could protect them, and because they were afraid of his slashing teeth and heavy hoofs. He was a tough master, punishing deserters savagely, but always ready to turn just as savagely upon an enemy, and he had the cunning of an old veteran of the range. Hackett had his work cut out for him all right. The thought gave Charlie a great deal of satisfaction.

Charlie had a feeling that the day he had sighted the herd Big Red had let down a bit. He very likely had been on constant guard for several days while they traveled up out of the desert. Then, feeling secure in the high valley pasture, he had dozed off and permitted the mares to wander into the open.

Charlie decided Big Red knew everything about light planes that a horse needed to know. When he had quitted the slotted canyon country to the south he had traded the canyon cover for timber cover. Charlie was certain that the herd had not gone far after crossing the pass. He would find them in the timbered parks above the Roaring River Canyon.

There was another angle which interested Charlie. The palomino colt was fast growing into a mature stallion who would challenge Big Red if he wasn't driven off. It seemed clear that the other horse would be more than willing to bring the matter to an issue

any time the palomino took it into his head to stand and fight.

Charlie rode out of the canyon up along Horse Thief Trail with the sun only an hour high. As soon as he was on the plateau he kept to cover, working his way from one stand of timber to another, scanning every meadow and park before entering it.

He got his first break an hour after leaving the canyon. He spotted the palomino colt cropping grass at the edge of a meadow. Big Red could keep the mares under cover, but he could do nothing about the colt, who seemed to lack the wariness of a wild horse. He was far out in the meadow where the grass was tall and lush.

Charlie worked his way to windward of the colt. He was very careful because there was no way of telling when he might ride up on the mares feeding under cover. After a short ride he pulled up to watch the colt and try to locate Big Red and the mares. As he watched, the thought came to him that the golden colt probably stayed out in the open so Big Red could not trap him. It was possible he wasn't so unwary as Charlie had thought at first.

He was about to shove on in search of the herd when the sound of a plane engine broke the stillness. The plane seemed to be flying low and it was swinging around the slope. Charlie expected to see the colt break for the timber, but the palomino kept on feeding. He was sure it was Hackett's plane and he didn't want Hackett to see the colt in action. If he saw the colt he'd know at once that he was a valuable animal.



The plane swooped down

Charlie moved to the edge of the timber. At that moment the colt jerked up his head and looked at him. He jerked his carbine from its boot and fired over the head of the horse. The palomino broke and ran, not into the timber but straight across to open meadow. The plane swooped down over him and up. Then it came around and back down over Charlie, and he could see Hackett leaning over the cockpit. The big man shook a fist at him as the plane zoomed to clear the trees.

Charlie heard Big Red's scream. It came from the same stand of timber he was in. For a moment Charlie saw the big leader standing at the edge of the timber looking down across the meadow at the aspen grove where the palomino had disappeared. Big Red seemed to know that the colt had betrayed him, and he was in a rage.

The colt appeared at the edge of the aspens and stood looking at Big Red. Big Red hurled a shrill challenge at him but did not break cover. He would see that the mares stayed hidden even after the drone of the plane died away.

Charlie gave up his plan to stampede the herd out through the pass. He had a feeling Hackett wasn't going to get them as long as they stayed in the heavily timbered area where the parks were small and cover was always easily and quickly reached. It was the palomino colt he was worried about. Hackett had gotten a good look at him, and might send in a gang to catch him. They could come in over the pass without crossing the Bar L range. This was open range, though it was considered part of Grandby Carter's grazing land.

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Charlie decided it was best not to disturb the herd or the colt. He'd go home and talk his father into letting him have Tex and Shorty for a day. They'd catch the colt and take him to the ranch. There was no use in spooking up the big red stallion, and making him change ranges. Charlie wanted the horses right where they were.

He left without disturbing them and headed for home. As he rode along he thought about the argument he would use with his father. He might have to get him up into the high country for a look at the colt. But no matter what it took he meant to have the palomino. Already he had a feeling for the young stallion that was stronger than that he had ever felt for any horse, even his beloved Trey Spot.

Before riding down into the canyon he stopped and looked back. He spotted movement and finally made out shapes. Big Red was taking the mares down to a small stream which emptied into Roaring River near the head of the canyon. Charlie looked at the sun. There was plenty of time. He turned back upcountry and made his way to a ridge from which he could look down upon the stream.

Finally he located the herd. Big Red had them bunched in a grove of aspens and they were moving down to drink. He spotted the golden colt easily. He was following along, too, but out in the open. The herd halted at the stream and the mares shoved forward eagerly, splashing into the stream, drinking thirstily, while Big Red stood on high ground watching them. The golden colt had moved around so that the herd was between him and the leader.

A bay mare lifted her head and looked at the colt, then she looked at Big Red. Charlie heard a soft nicker as the bay looked at the colt again. He was sure this mare was not the mother of the palomino, but she might have been his foster mother, the mare who had raised him. She was showing unmistakable signs of mother instinct. It was obvious that the colt wanted to go to her side. He took a step toward her, as she moved carefully to meet him.

Suddenly Big Red sounded a savage command and charged the ranks of the mares. The bay whirled and plunged heavily toward the herd. For a moment the golden colt faced the charging leader, but only long enough to let the bay get back into the herd and escape Big Red's teeth; then he whirled and raced away. Charlie felt his pulse beating hard. The colt's flashing hoofs hardly seemed to touch the ground. Big Red charged after him screaming his rage, but the colt slipped away from him like a swallow darting away from an owl.

The leader plowed to a halt and stood with his neck arched, his nostrils flaring. The colt wheeled and stood on a knoll. He sent a clear call ringing across the meadow. Big Red turned and trotted back to his harem.

Charlie pulled Trey Spot around and once more faced down the trail. He simply had to have that colt. What a horse he would make! Already he saw himself mounted on the palomino's back, riding in the valley meet next year. He let Trey Spot take her time in descending the narrow ledge trail into the dusk of the canyon. And he did not urge her even after they

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reached the bed of the canyon where the trail widened and was free from treacherous rocks.

When he rode out into the sunshine which lay hot and still upon the valley floor he sighed happily. He was so wrapped up with thoughts about the colt that he didn't notice the light plane parked in the level meadow below the barn until he was close to it.

When he did see it his face darkened. Hackett had his nerve landing on the Bar L. He supposed the meat hunter was asking to use the pasture as a landing field while he hunted the wild horses. Well, he would have something to say about that. Hackett probably thought he could work the Bar L out of lodging and grub for himself and his pilot.

Two men were standing near the corral, talking to his father and Shorty. One of them was Hackett, the other must be the pilot. He rode past the plane without looking at it. When he pulled up at the corral gate, the men turned and stared at him. His father's gaze was somber and grim. Charlie swung down and dropped Trey Spot's reins. He was ready for a showdown, but he didn't get to open his mouth. Grandby Carter spoke first and his voice was curt.

"This man says you shot at his plane with your saddle gun," he said.

Charlie stared back at his father, then he said in a voice as cold as Grandby's, "That's a lie. I did not shoot at his plane."

"There's a bullet hole in it," his father stated grimly.

Charlie stared at Hackett. Hackett was glowering at him. "You not only shot at us, you hit the plane. That's a criminal offense."

Charlie looked from Hackett to his father. Surprise stopped his words. His father believed Hackett. Charlie could read it in his eyes.

"I fired over the colt's head to scare him into the timber," he said slowly. "I shot before the plane was even in sight, and I shot in the other direction."

"There, that puts the lie in yore yarn, Hackett." Shorty sounded relieved. His lip was thrust out and his hands were on his hips.

"You keep out of this," Carter snapped.

"No use lying about it," Hackett said. "Buck will swear the kid shot at us, and we can show the bullet hole to prove you hit the plane."

Charlie was thinking about what he had wanted to tell Hackett down in Boone's store. He was glad now that he had kept his mouth shut.

"I didn't put a bullet through your plane," Charlie said quickly. He picked up Trey Spot's reins and opened the gate. What was the use of talking? His own father believed he had shot at the plane. He led Trey Spot into the corral and started unsaddling her.

"I'm going to let it pass this time," Hackett said. "But if I have any more trouble with that kid of yours I'll swear out a warrant and have him arrested."

"You better think twice on that score," Shorty retorted.

"I told you to keep out of this," Grandby Carter said. Charlie glanced at his father as he reached for the saddle blanket. He was scowling bleakly. "You'll have no more trouble with him. Now get off my land and stay off," he said in a tight voice.

Hackett and Buck turned and walked away. There was a grin on Hackett's fat lips. Charlie slid the bit

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out of Trey Spot's mouth and gathered up the saddle and blanket. When he turned toward the gate, his father was walking slowly up toward the house.

Shorty pushed his hat back on his head. His eyes were glinting and his chin was shoved out. "I'll have a word with that butcher when I'm off Bar L land."

"Better stay out of it, Shorty," Charlie replied wearily.

"It's a dirty frame," Shorty sputtered. "I have a notion to start packin' my old .44."

Charlie smiled in spite of his all-gone feeling. "It's a frame all right. Hackett is sore because I scared the colt out of his gun range. I fired long before the plane was in sight, but it looks as though he's made his account of it stick."

"Now don't get to feeling that way," Shorty said. "Yore dad will see things in the right light when he comes to think it over. He's kinda worried about things."

Charlie dragged the saddle across the yard without answering. Shorty ought to know by this time that his father didn't change his mind once it was made up. Shorty watched, an uneasy frown on his face. As soon as Charlie reached the saddle house Shorty stomped away toward the barn. Out across the meadow, the plane engine was warming up. Its exhaust swelled to a roar as Charlie appeared in the door of the saddle house. Buck was taking off, heading directly toward the house corral.

The nose of the plane lifted and with a rush of sound and wind it shot over the corral. The horses stampeded wildly toward the near fence. Charlie

caught a glimpse of a white face peering down at him. He thought he saw a triumphant leer on the face, but wasn't sure because he started to run toward the corral where the saddle horses were jammed up against the railing. Trey Spot was down and struggling, while Diamond and his father's bay were plunging to free themselves from the tangle.

Shorty came running out of the barn and they met at the corral gate. Before they could get it open, the horses had scattered and Trey Spot was on her feet shaking the dirt and dust from herself.

"The varmints," Shorty shouted. "That's a criminal offense, too."

Charlie was watching Trey Spot. She danced around, snorting and jerking her head. There wasn't anything wrong with her, but that did not soften his anger. He was glad he had already racked the saddle gun. As he stood there looking at the mare he knew he would have used it in the blinding rage which had gripped him.

"I'll meet up with that big ape in town," Shorty said. "I'll jump him and comb him down to a nub."

"I'll take care of him if he ever comes back here," Charlie promised grimly. He shoved his hands into his pockets and started toward the house. Still muttering angrily, Shorty headed for the bunkhouse.

Charlie's mother was seated in the big chair by the window when he entered. He wondered if she had seen what had happened. She smiled at him.

"Mrs. Garrity has hot rolls just out of the oven," she said. "I've eaten three of them."

Charlie smiled. He walked over and sat down beside

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her. She hadn't seen Buck buzz the corral, and he was sure his father hadn't told her anything.

"It's quiet without Ellen here," she said. "I miss her."

Charlie nodded. "I saw Big Red and the golden colt today," he said. Then he told her about his trip, leaving out the encounter with Hackett at the corral. There was no use in worrying her.

"Hackett will never drive the herd out of the timber with a plane," Ann said. "Not with Big Red leading them."

"I'll beat him to it," Charlie said. "I'll catch that colt before he can get a crew up there."

His mother patted his hand. "I'm going to ride up there with you and see Big Red. It would do me a world of good to get out into the open." Her mouth was set in a stubborn line the way he had seen it so often when she wanted to do something that Grandby Carter didn't want her to do.





8. *Hide-out*

GRANDBY CARTER drove into town the next day. He was back before noon and he had two men with him, both of whom Charlie knew. Ernie and Mack had both worked for the Bar L at various times, but mostly during the fall roundup when the cattle were being gathered in from the high country. Carter didn't say anything to Charlie about his plans. He was silent and grim when they were together, and Tex did not assign him any work. He took Ernie and Mack and Shorty with him and headed up toward the cow pasture.

Charlie finally brought himself to approach his father. "Got anything for me to do?" he asked as they met at the corral.

"If you can't see anything to do, I can't help you," his father grunted.

Charlie walked away feeling low. He wasn't needed

and he wasn't wanted. He sat down on a sawhorse outside the blacksmith shop and looked toward the river. After a bit he got to his feet and walked to the saddle house. He started gathering together a pack outfit. He might as well hit the trail into the hills and have a try at the golden colt.

When the pack was ready he went up to the house to tell his mother he'd be camping out for a few days. He met Mrs. Garrity at the kitchen door.

"Is Mother down yet?" he asked.

"No, I didn't wake her up," Mrs. Garrity told him. She peered anxiously down at Charlie. She knew there was something wrong and in her motherly way she was worried.

"Tell her I'm off into the hills for a few days," Charlie said.

"Alone?" Mrs. Garrity asked with a frown.

Charlie smiled at her. "I've been staying out alone since I was twelve," he said. "I like it."

He left her standing on the back porch nervously wiping her hands on her apron. Down at the corral, he saddled a pack horse and roped his supplies into place. He had helped himself to some of the canned stuff kept in the saddle house for the men.

Charlie did not hurry as he rode along. He was not in a hurrying mood. When he climbed out of the canyon he started a search of the high benches. It took him until noon to figure out what had happened to Big Red and his harem, but even as careful a leader as the big red horse could not obliterate the tracks of twenty horses. So Charlie was able to trail the herd into the rugged country above the Bar L range.

Big Red had selected an excellent hide-out. There were deep canyons and shallow arroyos, with many small grass parks surrounded by big timber. The grass was knee-high even at that season of the year. There wasn't enough range to make the high and inaccessible parks worth while as cow range, but there was an abundance for a small herd of horses. The grazing season would be short and the winter savage, but Charlie knew that would not bother Big Red.

Charlie doggedly scouted the rugged country until he finally located the herd. As on the earlier occasion, he spotted the palomino colt first. He was relieved to know that Big Red had not been able to chase the colt away. With the herd located, he started looking for a camping spot. Eventually he found a trout stream and made camp. The way it had worked out made his job tougher, but it also made the herd safer from Hackett and his men. He would take plenty of time to study the habits of the herd. Mostly he wanted to study the golden colt and plan a method of catching him.

He knew that no ordinary plan would work. He could not overtake and rope the colt, and even if he could get a rope on him he doubted if Trey Spot could handle him. He was certain he could gentle the palomino once he caught him, but the catching would take some doing.

There was a clear, deep spring a few yards from his camp and enough grass close by to feed two horses for several days. Charlie picketed his horses in deep cover, since he planned on scouting the breaks on foot. The boy figured that now he was in a safe haven Big Red would relax his vigilance.

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Charlie was an old hand at camping out. At this camp he would have no fire because Big Red would be sure to smell wood smoke. He would have liked a mess of trout from the brook. He had brought along a skillet but he knew he wouldn't use it.

After a lunch of canned beans and tomatoes he set out, working his way down country slowly, pausing on high points to check nearby meadows. He was looking for a certain type of meadow, one with a deep canyon on one side, a canyon with brush-choked rock banks. Big Red would pick just such a spot so that he could shove his herd over the edge and down the dangerous slope. Ann had said he always picked a spot where the getaway trail was so dangerous no horseman would dare to follow him.

Moving out on a high comb of rock Charlie sat down inside a thicket and carefully looked over the country below. There was a grass park at the base of the cliff where he sat. He bent forward as he caught a glint of sunlight. The palomino colt was standing out in the open with his head up. He seemed to be watching something near the edge of the park.

Charlie followed the direction of the colt's gaze and saw a gaunt wolf standing near the edge of the woods. He knew the wolf, though he had never seen her in the open before. Many times he had hunted her, and now when he had no rifle she was standing there in plain sight in the open. She was the last of the gray wolves, an old she-wolf with no bachelor pack to lead, but still a killer to be reckoned with. The persistent watchfulness and the rifles of the Bar L hands kept her up in the breaks where there were deer and small game.

The wolf smell appeared to anger the colt. He pawed and snorted, then charged toward her as though intending to stamp her into the ground. The she-wolf leaped aside and slashed at his legs. It was then that Charlie saw she was protecting a kill. There was the carcass of a fawn lying in the grass. Leaping and ducking and slashing, she drove the colt from her kill. He screamed in



The she-wolf slashed at his legs

anger and kicked lustily at the feinting shadow which circled around him, until he seemed suddenly to realize that he had started a fight which might not work out so well for him. He gave ground, whirled, and fled.

Charlie grinned. The colt was learning the hard way. Settling back on the comb of rock he waited with the

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sun beating warmly upon his back. He was rewarded by seeing a number of mares move out of the timber. He noted the location of the meadow and chuckled as he saw that there was a deep canyon on the left with a steep bank sloping into it.

Big Red seemed to feel that his hide-out was a secure one. The mares were scattered and fed in groups of three and four, with one group of six moving well out into the meadow. Charlie had his first good look at the horses and noted that a number of the mares had colts at their sides.

Charlie's interest sharpened when the golden colt started edging toward a group of four mares. The colt might be planning to steal the mares and start a herd of his own. After all, he was almost fully grown, and a young stallion has to think of the future.

There was a ravine leading down country which ran at right angles close to where the four mares stood. Big Red was not in sight. He probably was drowsing in the sun close to the woods. The bay mare who had been interested in the palomino was with the group he was now approaching. When the young stallion drew near, the mares raised their heads and stared at him. He laid back his ears and charged down upon them, his teeth bared.

The mares whirled and fled down the canyon with the golden colt racing behind them, nipping their flanks. When one of them tried to turn back, he lunged at her and she moved in close to the others again. It appeared that the colt had gotten himself a start toward a herd.

At that moment Big Red sounded off from the tim-

ber near the head of the ravine. He flashed into view, pounding down the slope. Charlie was so excited that he rose to his feet. It seemed to him that the young horse was using poor judgment or else that he was trying to taunt the leader as he always did when Big Red chased him. He swung the mares out on the open meadow and headed them toward a distant stand of spruce.

The foolishness of the colt's plan was soon evident. He could easily outrun Big Red, but the mares couldn't. The old veteran promptly overtook them and headed them back, slashing savagely at their rumps and kicking at them with his hoofs. The golden palomino leaped in squealing savagely, but Big Red drove him off in one smashing rush which almost knocked the colt off his feet.

It was clear that Big Red was in a mood to settle matters once he got the mares back to the herd, but by now the colt had cooled off. He danced away before the savage charges of the leader, and galloped up to a high knoll where he whirled and stood looking down at Big Red, who had halted and was glaring back at him.

"Golden Boy! That's what I'll call him!" Charlie almost shouted. Then he remembered that he was standing up in the open. Quickly he sank down and parted the bushes in front of him.

Charlie lay watching the horses for a long time, but there was no further action. After a while he lay back and let the mellow sun beat down on him. The warmth made him feel drowsy. He propped his chin on his hands and stared down upon the meadow. The mares had moved into the shade of the woods, and Golden

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Boy had disappeared from his grassy knoll. There were just sunshine and grass and green spruce lifting pointed tops into a blue sky.

Charlie spotted a badger in the meadow. It was the only moving thing in the entire expanse of waving grass. The old fellow came waddling through the grass, making the tassels jerk and sway. It came to open ground and started sniffing about. The newcomer appeared to have located a gopher or a squirrel hole, because it started digging. Charlie grinned as he watched the badger disappear into the ground. As a digger of holes the badger was better than any ranch hand Charlie had ever seen. In a very short time even the stumpy tail of the hunter had vanished.

Charlie rolled over on his back. A camp robber sailed down out of a tree and landed on a twig close to his face. Cocking its head on one side it chirped cheerfully, then hopped off the twig and strutted closer to Charlie. Of all the wild creatures the camp robber was one which had never learned to fear man. Charlie would as soon have shot Trey Spot as he would a camp robber. He slid a hand into his side pocket and fumbled at the package containing his sandwich. Breaking off a few bits of tinned biscuit he dropped them at his side. The camp robber hopped forward and picked up the biggest crumb, then sailed away into the trees with its prize.

Charlie yawned. He was supposed to be taking a page from the book of the cougar, who would often lie for twenty-four hours on a ledge or on a limb watching his quarry, making his plans, or just hoping an unwary animal would walk under his perch. The trouble was

that a cougar could doze off and still hear and see an approaching deer, while Charlie was a very sound sleeper and never heard anything once he dropped off.

Charlie closed his eyes, chancing a few minutes of complete relaxation. The minutes stretched into a half hour. He drifted along in dreamless sleep for a while, then he began to dream about Golden Boy. In his dream he thought the young stallion had walked out of the woods above and was standing looking down at him. His bush of blond mane flared above his wild eyes. And in his dream the boy was not at all frightened. So realistic was his dream that it seemed almost as if he could reach up and slip a halter over the colt's head.

Suddenly the dreamer opened his eyes. He did not move his head; he just blinked. The dream certainly had been realistic because it still remained before his eyes. Charlie blinked again. This was no dream! Golden Boy was standing there looking down at him, nostrils flaring, eyes rolling excitedly.

Charlie wouldn't have moved if a scorpion had walked across his chest. He was more than ever convinced that the palomino was not a wild horse in the way Big Red was wild, though he must have learned fear of man from the old leader.

Excitement made Charlie tremble as Golden Boy shook his head. The colt appeared to be puzzled. Then with a snort he whirled and trotted back along the ledge and into the timber.

Charlie sat up. He watched the colt turn down toward the meadow below. Big Red was standing watch on high ground near a spruce grove. He threw up his head as Golden Boy galloped toward the herd, then

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started toward the colt at a heavy trot. The palomino came to a halt and stood watching Big Red, who also stopped, and they stared at each other for a minute before Big Red turned back to the herd.

As Charlie sat watching the colt he could not help wondering what the young stallion would do if a rope ever settled around his neck. Roping so powerful a horse might prove disastrous. If Golden Boy acted like most broncos he could be handled, but if he fought the rope horse instead of the rope, he couldn't be choked down. The temptation to see what would happen was great. The question was how to get close enough to drop a loop over his head.

After the experience of the afternoon, he had an idea that Golden Boy could be ambushed. Once the idea had entered his mind Charlie knew that he would never have any peace until he had made the attempt. He moved back into the timber and headed for his camp.

As he made his way toward the stream where he had left his horses, he began to check all angles. First he had to consider Trey Spot. She was a great rope horse but she lacked weight. Golden Boy might upset her no matter how firmly she set herself. Then there was the difficulty of catching the colt off guard. He needed to be very close to the colt when he went into action. Given even a short lead Golden Boy would run away from the mare. By the time he reached his camp, Charlie knew what he would do. It would take time and preparation, but he was sure his plan would work.

His plan of campaign established, he broke camp and made tracks for home, being careful not to disturb

Big Red or his mares. Excitement rode with him, but having a pack animal to lead kept him from making very fast time.

When he got home he hurriedly cared for his horses and stowed away his gear. He had a favor to ask of his mother.

He found her digging with a trowel in a peony bed in the yard. He was glad to find her outdoors doing something. Grandby Carter sat on the back porch watching her with a frown on his face. He gave Charlie a quick look but said nothing.

"You saw Big Red?" Ann Carter stuck the trowel into the dirt and seated herself on the grass.

"He had holed up in the breaks with his herd," Charlie said.

"Playing it smart." His father spoke dryly.

"How about the golden colt?" his mother asked.

"He's with them." Charlie smiled eagerly. "He hangs around out of reach of Big Red."

"You've figured out a way to catch him. I can tell by just looking at you." Her eyes sparkled with eagerness.

Charlie nodded. "I'd like to borrow Diamond, Mother."

She looked startled for a moment. "Not if you plan to try roping Big Red," she said.

"I won't bother Big Red. I want the palomino colt and Big Red will be only too glad to be rid of him." He thought it best to emphasize the word "colt." If his mother knew what Golden Boy really looked like she wouldn't let him rope the young stallion.

"Big Red wouldn't be worth catching." Carter got to his feet and went into the house.

"Think you can break this colt?" his mother asked.

"Easy," Charlie said. "He's not really a wild horse, he was just born wild."

His mother hugged her knees and watched Charlie. She was seriously considering asking him to let her go along. She was feeling well and beginning to think Dr. Crittenden had been overcautious. Then she saw that Charlie wanted to carry out this plan all by himself. "He's grown-up," she thought. "From now on I'll be out of most of his adventures."

"You may take Diamond," she said.

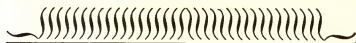
"Thanks," Charlie said. "I'll take good care of Diamond, and I'll be back in two or three days at most."

"Are you going out again today?" she asked. "Mrs. Garrity has a very special supper on the stove."

Charlie hesitated. He had planned on making a night ride back into the breaks, but the idea of a hot supper was tempting.

"I'll wait until morning," he answered.





9. *The Contest*

CHARLIE was riding Diamond and trailing Trey Spot and a pack horse. He had brought with his camp outfit a dragrope and set of hobbles. He had left early, and by the time daylight revealed the trees along the trail he was through Roaring River Canyon and heading toward the high, rough country overlooking the Bar L range.

He entered the barrens cautiously, keeping to timbered ridges, stopping often to scan the parks and meadows. He did not want Big Red to know he was in the barrens. With a string of three horses he had to move carefully. He finally reached the spot where he had slept while Golden Boy stood over him, watching. He had a hunch the colt's curiosity would urge him to revisit that spot a number of times.

Leaving Diamond concealed in an aspen grove he led Trey Spot into the open and picketed her in a

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small clearing, removing her halter and using only a nose loop to hold her. Returning to Diamond he mounted. From the grove to where Trey Spot was feeding was only a short run. If Golden Boy saw the mare he would come to her to make friends or to try to drive her away. Charlie would be so close he ought to be able to drop a rope on him.

The mare was cropping grass eagerly. She had been kept up so much she was eager for green feed. Charlie settled down to wait. He knew this game could go on for some time, and that it could easily be ruined if Big Red saw Trey Spot first. He was depending upon the study he had made of the movements of the horses. He knew that Big Red held the mares down on the bench near the canyon while Golden Boy stayed higher up where he was safe.

Finally Charlie spotted the wild herd. They were moving slowly up from the lower end of the bench. He could see Big Red, but caught no sign of Golden Boy. He began to worry. If the herd got much closer he'd have to move Trey Spot or risk a brush with Big Red. The mares kept moving steadily upward until Big Red finally swung around them and turned them down into a ravine which ran along the left side of the mesa.

The herd disappeared with Big Red pausing for a last look across the bench. They were barely out of sight when Charlie saw Golden Boy coming up the meadow at a swift gallop. He halted at the edge of the ravine but did not follow the herd. Instead he kept on up the bench, which indicated that Big Red might be just out of sight and too close for the colt to attempt going into the ravine.

Charlie held his breath as excitement filled him. In a minute Golden Boy would catch sight of Trey Spot. He halted suddenly and his head came up, and he whinnied softly. Trey Spot jerked up her head and her ears slanted forward. She answered his call eagerly.

Instantly Golden Boy broke into a trot. He swept into the little clearing, nickering loudly. Charlie reached for his rope and shook it out. Diamond stirred and tensed himself as the coils fell free.

Golden Boy swerved just before he reached Trey Spot's side. He lowered his head and leaped toward her. Trey Spot laid back her ears and whirled to present her heels to him. He slid to a halt and extended his muzzle toward her. He still had a lot of colt left in him. Charlie wanted to laugh. He set his boots firmly in the stirrups and got ready to give Diamond the word.

Suddenly Charlie half turned in his saddle. Big Red had come up out of the arroyo. The leader paused to stare at the two horses in the clearing, then with a savage call he charged up the slope. Charlie knew this was the moment for a split-second decision. If he tried now he might easily miss Golden Boy, and he would most certainly send Big Red and his band thundering away. He sat tight and waited for a better chance.

Golden Boy also had a decision to make. He could stand and fight for this trim mare he had found or he could try to drive her away ahead of him, hoping they could outrun Big Red. He decided to try to get her away.

Whirling, he leaped at Trey Spot and sunk his teeth into her rump. With a squeal of pain Trey Spot leaped away from those teeth. She was too terrified to lash

out at him with her shod hoofs. She hit the end of the picket rope and that slowed her a little. Then the nose loop slipped and the rope shot away from her. The instant she was free she started running, with Golden Boy racing at her side. She fled straight down the meadow.

Big Red thundered after the pair. He was fast, a lot faster than Charlie would have believed. He could not overtake Golden Boy, but he was gaining on Trey Spot. The palomino saw what was happening. He whirled and dodged into the path of the charging leader.

They crashed together near the edge of the mesa, and this time the youngster did not go down. It was Big Red who stumbled and plunged to the left, caught off balance because the colt had shifted just before they came together. Instantly Golden Boy lunged again. Big Red fought to keep his balance, but he was sent stumbling and slipping down the steep bank into the arroyo.

Charlie eased Diamond out of the grove. He thought he saw a chance to rope the colt now the battle was over. Diamond charged down upon the colt as he stood staring into the arroyo. Golden Boy was so filled with hot excitement over his victory that he did not see him or hear him.

As Diamond closed in, Charlie swung his rope and the loop landed neatly around the colt's neck. Diamond plowed to a stop and put his weight on the rope, tightening the noose into a choking band around the blond neck. Charlie kept Diamond's head up, kept him backing away a little so that the noose would keep Golden Boy's breath choked off and bring him down close to

strangulation and so weakened that Charlie could hobble him and get a halter on him.

But Golden Boy did not act the way a bronco should act when roped. As soon as the rope bit into his neck, instead of tugging and trying to pull away, he lunged straight at Diamond. The instant he leaped there was slack in the rope and the noose loosened.

There was nothing Charlie could do except save Diamond from a bad smashing. He shook loose the hitch around the saddle horn and tossed aside the rope, leaning far to the side to help Diamond escape the



Diamond went down

charge of the wild-eyed palomino. But fast as he was, Diamond could not get away clean. Golden Boy hit him as he pivoted and Diamond went down.

Charlie was thrown clear. He rolled over and scrambled to his feet. Diamond was lunging to regain his footing, thinking only of escape. Golden Boy stood on his hind feet and pawed the air. He sent a piercing call ringing down over the bench and the instant his forefeet hit the ground he was off.

Charlie straightened and watched the colt race down the meadow. Within four strides he had shaken loose the rope and was running beautifully, straight toward Trey Spot, who had halted and was watching him. As he drew near, she turned and fled, remembering his sharp teeth. He overtook her and shouldered her toward the timber. Charlie picked up his hat and slapped the dust from it. Then he started to laugh. He was laughing at himself. Golden Boy had not only beaten him, he had stolen his saddle mare.

Diamond stood a few yards away blowing and snorting. Charlie walked to him and slapped him on the neck. "He made us look pretty bad, old boy," he said softly. "But we'll get him yet."

Charlie recovered his rope, but he did not go back to get the pack animal which he had left hitched to a tree. He had no intention of losing Trey Spot, and he did not think it would take long to catch her. When he got within whistling distance she would come to him.

Hours later Charlie's good humor had vanished. He was able to follow their trail, but he could not overtake the pair. What he did not like was the direction Golden Boy was taking. He should have been swinging in a

great circle which would keep him in the barrens. What he was doing was heading south in an almost straight line. Charlie faced a decision. He could keep on and sleep out supperless, and without blankets, or he could go back and pick up the pack horse. He could not follow the trail after dark, so a return to the pack horse seemed the sensible thing to do.

There was one hopeful angle. Golden Boy might become so attached to Trey Spot that the mare would help him catch the colt. Taking what comfort he could from this thought he rode back and got the pack horse. That night he camped beside a stream and made a fire over which he cooked a hot supper. What Big Red did now did not interest him much.

All through the night, while Charlie slept rolled up in his blankets, Golden Boy kept on driving Trey Spot before him—due south. She gave him some trouble because she made frequent attempts to turn back. She saw no sense in running away from Charlie. But Golden Boy was a harsh master and willing to use his teeth. He was so much faster than she was that she couldn't escape from him. She finally gave up and let him push her up over the pass and down toward the desert.

Golden Boy now had the beginning of a herd of his own and he had no intention of letting the trim mare get away from him. If he returned to the breaks, Big Red might capture her for his harem. He still respected the powers of the old leader. All of his life Big Red had bossed and abused him. He was slow in realizing his own growing power. He felt he would be safer with a respectable number of miles between them.

The only other country he knew lay to the south, so he kept Trey Spot moving down through the foothills toward the desert. Being high-strung and temperamental, the mare did not take kindly to being bullied. But she was helpless. He was the first horse she had ever met who could outrun her. She had always kicked up her heels and run away from Kelly, the ranch stallion, when he tried to bully her. By the time the sun came up the next morning she was ready to stop and graze, but Golden Boy would not stop. He kept on pushing southward toward the dry wasteland below.

The green hills changed to brown sandy ridges covered with scrub oak and piñon. The canyons were dry-bedded washes choked with sand. As they moved ever deeper into the desert the heat and the dust added to Trey Spot's weariness and her head began to sag. She was thirsty and hungry, but Golden Boy refused to pause.

A wind laden with swirling sand swept up out of the desert. It whirled around them obliterating their tracks, turning their sleek coats to grimy gray. But Golden Boy was eager. He was now in country he knew. He guided Trey Spot into a deep canyon where the sandstorm was only a whisper. Here there were cottonwood trees and scattered bunches of tough grass which was dry but nourishing. There was a bitter spring back under a ledge. Between them they emptied the shallow spring but still they had not had their fill of water. Golden Boy stayed close to the mare as they started pulling the tough grass.

At first Trey Spot paid little attention to their surroundings, but when her hunger and weariness less-

ened she looked about her. Glancing up at the yellow and red walls of sandstone, she thought at first that Golden Boy had brought her to a ranch. Under the jutting lip of a rim stood stone walls with windows and doors cut in them. The walls were broken in places and there was no glass in the windows or doors in the doorways.

Big Red had discovered that in this canyon of the dead his herd was safe from Navaho horse hunters. No Navaho would enter the canyon because they feared the dead and would not go into a house or a village where death had struck. It was their custom to burn their own hogans if a member of the family died indoors, and to build a new hogan far from the site of the old one.

And the canyon was a good hide-out from white meat hunters as well. No plane could fly between the ragged rims because of the fierce downdrafts and the narrowness of the canyon. And no ground hunters cared to poach upon the reservation of the Navaho.

Golden Boy made use of what he had learned from Big Red. Only one thing made him restless—he wanted a herd of his own, but he had only Trey Spot. He knew about the scattered herds of the Navahos, but he had no knowledge of the ranches which lay farther to the south which Big Red had often raided.

For a little while he was happy to have Trey Spot beside him, and to be away from Big Red. Trey Spot did not like the wild life, but she soon got toughened to its rigors. She raced with Golden Boy down the rock-strewn bed of the canyon, or stood with him on high ledges staring down over the silent, brilliantly colored

wasteland. The days were burning hot but the nights were chilly. At dawn and at dusk the coyotes sang and laughed.

And here, too, were cougars, lank pale-colored killers, who were always hungry because there were so few deer. Why the half-starved cougars and the little wolves stayed in the desert when they could easily have gone to the mountains where game abounded was something only Mother Nature could explain. But they stayed and they fought a savage battle to survive. Driven by hunger, the yellow cats were dangerous even to a grown horse.

But Golden Boy protected Trey Spot and the big cats were always sent padding away licking their lips, snarling defiance but unwilling to face his fierce anger. Trey Spot longed for a feed of oats and a rubdown, but now Golden Boy did not have to watch her. She depended on him for protection and for guidance, just as she once had depended upon Charlie.





10. *The Meat Hunters*

CHARLIE awoke at daylight. He tossed aside his blankets and sat up blinking. The events of the past day came to him in a flash. Golden Boy had made off with Trey Spot. He pulled on his boots and fixed a hurried breakfast, then loaded the pack horse and saddled Diamond.

He trailed Golden Boy and Trey Spot until the sandstorm hid their tracks. Halting on a rim overlooking the desert, he sat staring down upon a vast pattern of red cliffs, wind-carved pinnacles, dry washes, and white sand dunes. The pair had vanished into that vast desolation. But Charlie had a feeling they would come back. He hoped they would return before winter set in. Trey Spot lacked the rugged strength to live through a high country winter. He patted Diamond's shoulder.

"When she comes back she will have a great colt," he said.

Diamond snorted. He wanted to turn back. He had

no liking for the desert. The pack horse just stood with his head drooping, his nostrils flaring as he blew into the dry sand. It did not matter much to him one way or the other.

Charlie knew it would be useless to go on. He did not know the country below. There were hundreds of deep canyons where the palomino could hide. He was almost certain to return to the range he had known as a colt, but Charlie had no idea where that might be. So, sick at heart, he turned back toward the ranch.

Charlie walked slowly up to the house. He was irritated because during his absence Dean Bailey had driven Ellen out to the ranch, and because she had asked his mother's permission to spend another week in town, and because Shorty had poked fun at him. He was frowning when he opened the door and stepped into the living room. When he saw his father seated at the center table working on his accounts his frown deepened. He had expected to find his mother alone. She turned from the table where she was fixing a bowl of wild roses.

"Did you bring him in?" she asked eagerly.

Grandby Carter merely glanced up, then went back to his figuring. Charlie shook his head. "Golden Boy ran off with Trey Spot," he said, anxious to have it over with.

His mother looked at him for a moment, then her eyes began to dance. Carter closed the account book with a sharp snap.

"So your colt has suddenly become a full-grown stallion?" His words bore a sharp edge, especially the word "colt."

Charlie met his father's eyes. "He's taller than Diamond, but about the same weight." He smiled at his mother. "He didn't like the idea of a rope."

"We'll have to round her up—she's a valuable mare," Carter said, and his tone indicated she was a valuable Bar L mare.

"They went out over the pass into the desert," Charlie said. "I lost their trail below the painted rims, but she'll come back," he added hopefully.

"With a scrub colt!"

"It will be the best colt we ever had on the ranch," Charlie said, color mounting to his cheeks.

His father frowned. "We're in for wild horse trouble," he said. "I made a mistake ordering Hackett off the place. Now we'll have two wild stallions to worry about."

"He's not like Big Red," Charlie protested. "He'll gentle and he'll make a fine ranch stallion."

Carter laughed disagreeably. "I suppose he'll take Kelly's place?"

"Wait until you see him!" Charlie retorted.

Ann Carter had not said anything. She was watching her husband and her son, a worried look in her eyes. She was seriously disturbed by the antagonism which had grown up between these two she loved.

"How about that man and his dogs?" she asked.

Her husband shrugged his shoulders. "I was going to send him packing out of here, but now I guess I'll let him go on up and have a try at those wild horses."

"I never saw such a collection of brutes as he has with him," Ann Carter remarked. "I don't like the idea. They might run the cattle."

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"There's nothing in the high country for them to run," Grandby said.

"What good will it do to run the herd with dogs?" Charlie asked hotly.

His father smiled bleakly. "He may run them over the pass and into the desert where Hackett can get at them."

Charlie turned on his heel and stamped toward the stairs. He halted at the bottom step and looked back. "You've already told him to go ahead?"

"I'm telling him now," Carter said shortly.

Charlie went on up the stairs. He heard his mother talking softly and earnestly as he jerked his bedroom door shut.

Charlie sat down on the bed and pulled off his boots. He was angry, more angry than he had ever been with his father. But when he got under the shower a few minutes later he decided things could be worse. Hackett wouldn't get Golden Boy, and he was pretty certain that was what the meat hunter wanted. He wouldn't make much money rounding up a herd of eighteen mares and a few scraggly colts. Letting the dog hunter go through the ranch didn't mean much, except that now Hackett thought he had something on the Carters and could do as he pleased. He would merely be hunting on open range which he could have reached by going around through the desert and up over the pass just as easily.

When Charlie went down to care for his horses he saw nothing of the man or his dogs. They had already left for the high country.

Up in the breaks Jake Proby had made camp near

the spot where Charlie had camped. His outfit consisted of a pack horse, camp equipment, a saddle horse, and his five big dogs. The dogs were savage brutes, none of them being of any special breed, but each of them tough and half wild. Jake could handle them but he was the only person who could do anything with them. He chained them to trees when he went scouting. The use of a heavy whip had cowed them into obedience.

Hackett had not bothered to ask Jake where he came from. The idea of flushing the wild herd out of inaccessible country with dogs looked as though it might work. He grubstaked Jake, not because he thought the herd was worth much effort, but because he had had a good look at the golden colt and knew he was a valuable animal.

For reasons of his own, Jake preferred to stay out of settled communities. He had a grubstake and would pick up a few dollars. But as he sat near his campfire he scowled darkly. He had just returned from scouting the herd. It was a small one. Jake had missed some of the mares and judged there would be less than a dozen rounded up. All Hackett had agreed to pay him was a percentage from the sale of the meat. He was angry because Hackett had claimed the herd to be bigger than it really was. He had the grubstake and a few dollars Hackett had advanced. He got to his feet and kicked dirt upon the fire, then started breaking camp.

When the pack horse was loaded, he turned the dogs loose and mounted his horse. He'd show Hackett he couldn't be played for a sucker; he'd move out and down to Taos where he had a friend who owned a ranch

in the hills and hunted cougars for bounty. The dogs prowled ahead of him as he rode up toward the pass. He kept them within range of his voice but let them forage.

A black cloud was piling up in the notch ahead. To a mountain man that cloud would have been a warning, but to Jake it was just a cloud. At intervals it was split by forked lightning while thunder rumbled along the granite walls of the pass. Jake took some notice of the cloud when he saw that the wall of rain below it was sweeping toward him. He looked about for shelter. He was in an open meadow but there was a lone pine on a knoll close to the trail. Jake took shelter under the pine.

Snatching his slicker loose from behind his saddle he pulled it around his shoulders and sat down with his back against the tree. His horse turned tail to the storm and stood with its back humped, its head down. The pack animal took a similar stand. Water suddenly poured down over Jake, the air was filled with white light, and the ground shook as lightning slashed out of the cloud.

Jake pulled the slicker tighter around him, staring into the dark wall of rain. White light flamed in his face; the whole tree shuddered, then split down its full length. Jake jerked forward, then settled back against the blasted trunk and did not move. The saddle horse went down as though shot, while the pack horse staggered away down the trail.

A day later Charlie rode up the trail toward the pass. He had been scouting the breaks and was puzzled because he had not been able to locate Jake or his camp. He had decided Jake must have gone out over the pass

and determined to make sure. He was hopeful that the hunter had made up his mind the wild herd wasn't worth driving. Then he came upon the pack horse and knew something must have happened to Jake. The animal appeared to be weak and dazed. Charlie stripped off the pack, then rode on. When he came upon the body he knew at once what had happened. He looked around for the dogs but saw nothing of them. The saddle horse lay where it had fallen. Charlie did not dismount, he headed Diamond back down the trail and rode as fast as he could to the ranch.

When he reached home he turned his horse over to Shorty without explanation and hurried to the house. Grandby Carter was in the kitchen, washing up for supper. When Charlie burst in his father looked at him, then dropped the bar of soap.

"What's up?" he asked sharply.

"That horse hunter with the dogs," Charlie said. "He's dead, hit by lightning."

He heard Mrs. Garrity gasp as she let a skillet drop on the stove with a clatter. Ann Carter had come to the door. She stopped and looked at Charlie.

"How terrible!" she exclaimed.

"We'll go after him," Carter said grimly, his eyes fixed on his son's face.

Charlie stared back and a cold feeling gripped his stomach because of the way his father was looking at him. "He sat down under that lone pine below the pass," he said quietly.

Carter nodded slowly and his face relaxed. Ann Carter came across the room and slipped an arm around Charlie and they walked out of the kitchen together.



He knew what had happened

The moon was up an hour after supper was over. Carter took Tex and Shorty with two pack horses, and Charlie went with them to lead them to the body. Ann phoned the sheriff and coroner.

They packed Jake and his outfit down from the pass, getting back to the ranch at daybreak. The sheriff did not come, but the coroner was at the ranch when they rode in. He asked a few questions while they were loading the body and Jake's outfit into his station wagon, then drove away. Charlie was upset, but he was glad the wild herd had not been run by the dogs.

The incident would eventually have been forgotten but for the five dogs, who stuck together and soon met the old she-wolf. She took an interest in them and they let her help them solve the problem of getting food. With such formidable help the old wolf was soon making many kills. The dogs learned to pull down deer, and they lacked the man-fear possessed by the wolf. They were willing to pull down calves or colts where the wolf had been wary about stirring up her most deadly enemy, Man.

And so the Bar L found itself with wolf trouble, something no one had worried about for years. The men all started carrying rifles, and Charlie was given the job of patrolling the high range. The killers had to be destroyed no matter what the cost.

In the fight against the pack, Big Red for once was on Charlie's side. One morning the herd was feeding near a stand of aspen when the pack swept out of the timber, running smoothly, on the prowl for a kill. They all burst pell-mell from the timber except the wolf; she skirted the park because it was daytime. Sighting a

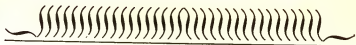
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mare and colt feeding a short distance from the herd, the dogs leaped yelping to the attack.

The mare whirled and sounded a cry for help as she leaped between the killers and her foal. Big Red heard her squeal of terror and charged to the defense. The dogs knew nothing about wild horses—every horse they had ever met had run from them. They were startled to see the big stallion charging to meet them, but they came on, swerving around the mare and leaping at the colt. One of them got a grip on a hind leg and the colt went down. The mare leaped on the dog with all four feet, sending him rolling over in the grass. Big Red smashed another dog into the ground, and when his big hoofs lifted, the dog did not rise. The other dogs sprang back, snarling savagely.

They watched with flaming eyes while Big Red smashed down upon the dog again and again, stamping the carcass into a bloody pulp. The wolf was calling to them from the timber, and the dog that the mare had crippled was limping to meet her. The other three broke and fled when Big Red charged them.

After that, Big Red kept a closer watch over his herd, but the dogs had learned a lesson. Now they paid more attention to the old wolf. The dog Big Red had killed was an old dog. Now there were three young dogs and just one old one left. Handling them was much easier for the she-wolf.



11. An Old Friend

GRANDBY CARTER had left for Cedar Bank early one morning. Charlie was down at the corral grooming Diamond. He had been riding the big horse ever since he had lost Trey Spot. Looking up from his work, he saw his mother standing at the corral gate. She was dressed for riding. She opened the gate and stepped into the corral.

"I'm going along today," she said. "I want to see Big Red."

Charlie looked doubtful. He was sure if his father were there he would not let her go. For a moment he hesitated. His father would blame him, he would think he had asked her to go with him as soon as his back was turned. She smiled brightly.

"We'll just forget all the nonsense," she said. "I've had so much rest I can't stand any more."

Charlie grinned happily. "I'll catch Blackie for myself," he said.

He caught Blackie after some maneuvering. Blackie had no desire to break his loafing streak. Charlie's mother handed him the lunch she had packed and he tied it back of his saddle. After she had mounted Diamond he took a deep breath and laughed eagerly.

"We'll have a wonderful day," she said.

Charlie swung into his saddle after tucking his carbine into its boot. They rode across the valley and up through Roaring River Canyon, then out over Horse Thief Trail. They did not hurry, and there were no wild and reckless races when they reached the upper meadows, such as they used to have when they were out together alone. It was almost like having Grandby Carter along to see that there were no foolish and dangerous dashes over rough ground.

The cows and calves were in the high country now and they were scattered in small bunches. The calves made easy prey for the wild dog pack. Ann was eager to reach the breaks, but Charlie had his circle to make around the cattle. The only way to fight the killers was to keep riding steadily. Sooner or later Charlie would sight the pack and get in a shot, possibly two. His job was to kill the wild dogs.

They had almost completed the circle around the pasture land when Charlie spotted fast-moving forms in a meadow below. He knew instantly what they were. Wolves would not run in the open in broad daylight. He was sorry his mother was along on the morning that he caught sight of the killer, but he couldn't pass up the chance. The leaping gray forms were heading up-country. Charlie led the way to cover and they sat waiting.

"Here they come," he said in a low voice as he slid the carbine from its boot.

Charlie was glad he was riding the even-tempered Blackie, who did not mind shooting from the saddle. When Charlie raised the rifle, Blackie lowered his head. He was wise to saddle shooting and knew the muzzle blast could be deafening.

The four dogs leaped through a thicket and fanned out. For an instant Charlie hesitated. They were big, savage fellows, but he hated to shoot. The one in the lead had a wide muzzle and erect ears like a wolf.

As Charlie hesitated, a calf bounced out of a thicket where its mother had hidden it. Bawling loudly, it raced toward its mother, who was feeding in a meadow below. The lead dog yelped eagerly and swung to the right to intercept the calf. Charlie steadied the front sight on the shoulder of the lead dog, then squeezed the trigger.

The carbine barked sharply. The lead dog broke stride, his speed carrying him on for two long leaps before he plunged forward and rolled in the grass. The other dogs cut sharply to their right and headed back for the timber. They were out of sight before Charlie could work the lever of the carbine.

He lowered the rifle and looked at his mother. Her face was white. She loved dogs; even these killers had her sympathy.

"That was a fine shot," she said in a low voice. "But it's a shame to have to kill them."

"A dog is worse than a wolf when he goes wild," Charlie replied, quoting his father without thinking.

"They may leave," his mother said hopefully.

"They'll be more careful at any rate," Charlie said.

He knew this would teach the pack a lesson they would not forget. After every brush with man and his rifle they would be more difficult to track and to see. He was sure the she-wolf was waiting for them in the woods. He had seen her tracks with those of the dogs many times.

"Want to look at him?" Charlie asked.

"No," she said quickly. "I'd like to see Big Red. I just have a feeling he'll know me."

Charlie smiled. He didn't think the scarred old horse would remember Ann Carter, but he didn't want to spoil her good time, she was so sure and so eager.

They rode into the breaks and circled. Charlie knew about where to look for the wild horses. He spotted several of the mares on the same bench where Golden Boy had shoved Big Red into the arroyo.

"We'll circle and slip up on them so you can get a good look at Big Red," he said.

They circled and were able to take up a position above the mares, and not more than a quarter of a mile away. As they looked down upon the herd, Charlie kept glancing at his mother. When Big Red appeared from a stand of aspens, she bent forward in the saddle and fixed her gaze upon him.

"It's the red stallion. It's Big Red," she said softly. "But I wish I hadn't come."

"Why?" Charlie asked curiously.

"He's old and he looks tired," she said. "This is his last season."

"He's a tough old brute just the same," Charlie replied. "We'll ride out into the open and you'll see that he has plenty of action left in him."

His mother shook her head. "No. Let's slip away and find a spring where we can eat our lunch. I'm ready to go home now."

They rode away without disturbing the wild horses. Ann Carter was silent as they rode along. Charlie guessed Big Red was tied up with a lot of memories for his mother. He wanted to ask why she did not ride out in the open to see if he recognized her. He decided that seeing the scarred old champion making his last stand had somehow saddened her.

But when the fried chicken and jelly sandwiches were spread beside a spring she regained her good spirits. "It's wonderful to be out for a day again." She laughed ruefully. "But I'll be an old woman tomorrow. I'm stiff and sore already."

"You need to ride more," Charlie said.

She smiled at him. She knew her days of wild riding were over. As she looked at her son she wanted to ask him a lot of questions, to have a talk heart-to-heart as they used to do when he was younger. But she was keeping a secret from him, so it would not be the same. She sighed and took a bite of fried chicken.

Charlie looked at her quickly. She seemed to be enjoying herself, yet she looked sad. He wanted to talk to her about his father, but couldn't seem to get started. She caught his expression and laughed at him.

"Only one piece of chicken for you?" she asked.

Charlie reached for the remaining drumstick. He decided he had imagined that she was feeling blue. He was sure of it when she started talking about a picnic she was planning when Ellen got back to the ranch.

"She's very nice," Ann Carter said, her eyes watching Charlie's expression.

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Charlie had dug a heel into the soft ground and was staring at the white grass roots he had turned up. He looked up and met his mother's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "She's like you."

"Thanks," she said softly, then jumped to her feet and laughed down at him. "Time to head for home," she cried.

Charlie looked up at the sun. They might reach the ranch before Grandby Carter got back from town but he doubted it. Grandby had a lot of business to attend to, but he'd be sure to be home by dark, and that would be as early as they could get there.

They rode down out of the breaks and over the steep trail into the canyon. The sky was aflame with a red sunset as they crossed the valley. When they passed the wagon shed Charlie saw that the Buick was in its stall. He rode up to the house and helped his mother out of the saddle. It was the first time he had ever done that—usually she was off before anyone could help her. At the gate she turned.

"It was a wonderful day. We'll have to do it again."

Charlie felt a lump rise in his throat as he turned to lead the horses down to the corral. His father was waiting for him at the corral gate. He looked angry.

"Your mother isn't supposed to ride," he said.

Charlie shoved the corral gate open and let Diamond and Blackie enter. He turned and looked at his father.

"I'm sorry."

"I know it was her idea," his father said harshly. He seemed to be hesitating about something. "If you ride with your mother again you are never to leave her, no matter what you have to do."

Charlie stared and waited. He expected Grandby to tell him why, but his father just turned on his heel and walked away.

Charlie cared for the horses and then went to the house. As he opened the door he heard laughter. Ellen had returned with his father. When she saw Charlie, she turned away from Shorty, who had been telling her a funny story.

"Hello," she greeted him.

"Hello," Charlie said. "I thought you were going to stay in town two weeks."

Shorty chuckled. "Convertibles bore her to death."

Ellen flushed. "I came out here to ride horses," she said. "Cedar Bank is as bad as Middleton."





12. Desert Chase

TREY SPOT and Golden Boy soon discovered that the bunch grass in the canyon of the dead was getting scarce. After the lush meadows of the high country, it afforded only a starvation ration. Water seeped into the bitter spring so slowly that they never had all they wanted to drink. These were the things which had forced Big Red to quit the desert. Two horses could live but the hard existence made them restless.

Within a few weeks Golden Boy was ready to make a change. It was more than the need for better grass and water. He was driven by an urge to seek out more mares and to build up a herd of his own. So there came a day when he led Trey Spot out of the canyon into the mesa country to the south. This was the home of the Navaho Indians who were by nature nomads and scarcely touched by the white man's civilization. They

were scattered over the desert in many families and clans.

Among the Navahos, the sheep and the goats, the hogan and the children, all belong to the women. The horses and the saddles belong to the men. Turquoise jewelry may be owned by either. No man is considered wealthy or of importance to the tribe without horses, no matter how many sheep his wife owns. He may live more comfortably, but he will be looked upon as a poor man unless he has horses.

The horses of the Navaho were seldom good animals. Usually they were bony creatures who survived on the meager range only because of their toughness. Golden Boy made his first raid on a herd belonging to Willie Yellow Man. He stole five mares and drove them into the hills a few miles from Willie's hogan.

Trey Spot did not take kindly to the mares, and they did not like her. But Golden Boy bullied and nipped them all without favor. They submitted to his leadership, but they lacked the fire and dash of truly wild horses. For one thing they were seldom alert and never ready to stampede when he gave the signal.

Willie Yellow Man discovered the theft at once, and by reading signs knew exactly what had happened. He called in the men of his clan and they held a council. There was much talk around the fire pit while the men ate roast kid. Everyone was disappointed when Willie explained that the raiding party was made up of one stallion and one mare, but even the capture of two horses interested them. The animals would go to the man catching them, and Willie would get his mares back.

After the council, they all mounted and rode into the desert, scattering in every direction, with Willie and his uncle, Tom Begay, and Willie's son, Bekis, taking the trail of the stallion. It was understood that when the herd was located a signal would be given and the clan would then close in for the drive.

Golden Boy and his herd were not difficult to find. The Navaho mares and Trey Spot were not wild horses, and lacked the wary watchfulness necessary for maintaining their freedom. Besides, the Navaho mares had no desire to be free. Trey Spot was beginning to like the wild life, but she saw no reason for hiding. They were a trial to Golden Boy, who had learned in a hard school.

Willie located the herd just before sunset the first day out. He and Tom and Bekis lay on a ledge watching the horses.

"The big one I do not want," Tom told them. His eyes were on Golden Boy and he was thinking that to tame the stallion might cost him a few broken bones.

Willie just grunted. Bekis said, "The black mare has a brand."

Willie grunted again. Bekis grinned. "I will catch her myself," he said. The mare appealed to him very much. He knew a fine horse when he saw one. This mare might well be the fastest horse in the clan, possibly on the whole reservation. He imagined himself winning races, even from the white ranchers.

"She will be yours," Willie said, and Bekis knew his father was joining with him against Tom.

Wiggling back out of sight, they returned to their horses which were hitched in a sand wash. Willie made a small fire which sent a thin spiral of smoke into the

evening sky. Bekis was sent back to the ledge to watch the herd and to check their movements.

Very soon dusky riders began dropping into the wash. They appeared from different directions and always popped into sight silently and suddenly as though the ground had opened and let them out. A few sat in worn old saddles, some rode bareback. All of the boys were mounted, but none of them had saddles, and they all used rope hackamores because they did not own bridles. There were sixteen men and eleven boys in the band.

There was no need to give instructions, but Tom Begay felt that the occasion called for a short speech. He never passed up a chance to talk. Willie stood aside and said nothing. The Navahos had a very simple plan for catching wild horses. The idea was to run them in relays of fresh riders, to keep them from water, food, or sleep until they were fagged out and could be easily caught. They knew that a wild stallion always led his herd in a circle so as not to leave his range.

Golden Boy sensed that something was wrong. He stood on a dune watching the mares as they moved restlessly about trying to find a few bunches of grass. He watched and listened and tested the wind with flaring nostrils. He heard and smelled and saw nothing, but he was worried. He moved closer to the mares and whinnied impatiently.

Suddenly the evening silence was broken by wild shouts. Where there had been nothing but rocks and scrub sage on the ridge above, there appeared a band of mounted Navahos. They came charging down the rocky slope at reckless speed.

Golden Boy whirled and leaped toward his herd. He lashed at the mares in a frantic effort to stampede them. Startled more by his screaming attack than by the approaching yelling riders, they raced away.

Golden Boy kept them bunched and running fast for more than a mile. By that time he knew it was impossible to make them run fast enough to shake off the howling pursuers. He and Trey Spot could easily leave the Navahos behind, but the Indian mares did not put any heart into the flight. He lashed at them and shouldered them. They refused to stay bunched and soon two of them simply gave up the chase and stood still.

Golden Boy dared not turn back to round them up because the Navaho riders were closing in. He drove the other three on, but after another half mile he had to let them drop out. With Trey Spot racing at his side, the Indians were soon left behind.

The Navahos paid no attention to Willie's mares. The prize they were after was the stallion and the slim racing mare. Willie's horses would drift back to the home range in a couple of days.

As the Navahos had expected, Golden Boy ran in a great circle. He kept running long after the last Navaho pony had faded from sight. At last he halted on a high ridge to let Trey Spot blow. He took a deep breath of the fast cooling air. Trey Spot breathed deeply and shook her head. But before she had taken a second breath Golden Boy sounded a warning. Five riders had appeared out of a wash. They galloped toward the ledge shouting and swinging ropes.

Golden Boy and Trey Spot were off again. The stallion set such a fast pace that the five riders were quickly

swallowed up in the white moonlight which now flooded the desert. Again he bent his course in a circle to keep within familiar range, and again he was forced to halt while Trey Spot regained her wind. But there was no rest. This time three riders appeared and took up the chase. Their shrill, wild cries allowed the other Navahos scattered over the desert to plot the course Golden Boy was following.

Though there was a full moon they could not be seen at any great distance, but the sound of their pounding hoofs carried far on the clear night air. Golden Boy now headed for a water hole. They were both very thirsty. Trey Spot nickered eagerly when she smelled the water in the wash below.



The Navaho riders were closing in

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They plunged down the bank and moved toward the water which gleamed muddy yellow in the moonlight. Suddenly four tall men rose from the ground near the hole. The shouting started again. Golden Boy whirled and sent Trey Spot plunging up the sandy bank. The guards at the water hole did not follow, but two riders took up the chase just over the rim of the wash.

Golden Boy headed for another water hole ten miles away. By nipping Trey Spot he kept her running fast until they had outdistanced their pursuers, then he let her trot. This time they approached the water carefully, though they were filled with a burning thirst.

But they did not get to drink. In the desert the Navahos knew every water hole. This time there were only two small boys at the hole but that made no difference. They yelled as loudly as grown men. Golden Boy charged away. Fifty yards from the water hole three riders tried to cut Trey Spot away from Golden Boy, but he drove her between them and on across an open mesa. It seemed to the fleeing pair that the desert was sprouting Indians.

They outdistanced the three riders and Golden Boy again slowed their pace. Trey Spot was past caring when he nipped her flanks. She plodded on because she wanted to escape the yelling Navahos as much as Golden Boy, and because she had the heart to put up a fight. But she was near exhaustion. She wanted a drink, but Golden Boy knew they dared not go near a water hole.

It was Willie and Tom Begay who had taken up the chase the last time. They kept on the trail of the pair because they knew the mare was weakening. They did

not hurry or try to catch up, but they did not lose the trail. They kept the pair moving steadily but did not try to run them.

By the time daylight came Trey Spot was stumbling. Golden Boy halted on a knoll. He was expecting to see riders appear and they did appear. They did not seem to have been following, because they came out of a wash to the south.

While Tom had gone on trailing the pair, Willie had joined Bekis and cut across the circle to wait at a likely spot. They had the advantage of fresh horses.

Willie shook out his rope eagerly. Bekis bent forward and uncoiled his own rope. They would try for the mare. If she was tired enough they might overtake her.

Golden Boy broke and as he leaped he tried to push Trey Spot into a gallop. She made a noble attempt and for a hundred yards she pulled away from Willie and Bekis. But they were mounted on their best horses and those horses were not tired.

They bore down upon Trey Spot, swinging their ropes. Both loops settled over her head. The instant she felt the rope she stopped running. She was too well trained to fight a rope. The feel of the rope meant that she was supposed to stop. Bekis was the first to reach her side. In spite of Willie's gruff warning, he rode close to her and laid a hand on her neck. Trey Spot shook her head wearily. She was glad to feel a friendly hand. Now she would be fed and watered.

Willie made a feeble attempt to overtake Golden Boy. Tom had ridden up and had gone along with him. Neither of them really cared to get a rope on the stal-

lion and he ran away from them easily. Heading up along a ridge he finally halted to look back. He sent a wild cry ringing back to Trey Spot. Tired as she was she answered him.

Then Golden Boy arched his neck and galloped away. He abandoned the great circle he had been making and headed north toward the distant mountains. He kept on going as the sun mounted higher and the desert heat became intense. His sleek coat was streaked with sweat and caked with dust. He shook his head as he loped along and rolled his eyes wildly each time he passed a stunted bush or a dry wash. But no Indians leaped from cover to shout at him; he saw only the darting lizards and the buzzards wheeling in the pale sky.

He was afraid to seek water in the desert, but he knew he must soon drink or he could not go on. Through the day he kept up the long effortless lope over the dry and waterless waste. He ceased checking landmarks and looked only toward the steel-blue mountains lying against the horizon.

Toward evening he came to a narrow valley at the foot of a ridge which was heavily timbered. There was a big cottonwood grove in the valley and he moved eagerly toward it. He could smell willow and willow meant water. Weary as he was he slowed to a walk and moved warily, holding himself ready for a fast break if this water was also guarded. Nothing happened. A jay screamed at him from a high limb, a magpie sailed away and alighted on a rock, and a cottontail rabbit dashed toward a pile of rocks. Those good omens caused him to leap forward.

Inside the grove there was water, a large pool of it lying at the base of a great slab of rock. Golden Boy plunged into the pool and thrust his muzzle deep into the cool water. But he did not drink heavily at first. It was enough to feel the water washing the caked dryness out of his mouth and throat.

He stayed close to the pool for a long time. The trees around the pool were sweet-bark cottonwoods. Golden Boy ripped bark from the saplings and stripped leaves from the branches, eating greedily. This was the first plentiful supply of food and water he had seen in many days. By the time the moon had risen above the ridge he began to feel secure. He had escaped from the yelling Navahos but he remained alert and watchful.

He need not have worried. Willie Yellow Man's clan gathered at a water hole soon after Trey Spot was captured. They drifted in from the desert and stood around admiring the mare. They all pretended not to see the Bar L brand. They knew Willie and Bekis would find a way to get around the brand. They did not regret letting the stallion get away. He would have caused them a great deal of trouble. They all envied Bekis, especially the boys who were trying hard to get a few horses of their own. After a good deal of talk they all rode to Willie's hogan where his wife and daughters would have to cook them a big breakfast.

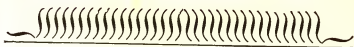
Back at the pool, Golden Boy rested and ate and drank. Now that he had covered a large part of the distance to the mountains he had a strong desire to keep on going. Without Trey Spot he was restless. And a great longing seized him to return without further delay to the high country.

After the rugged weeks in the desert he was gaunt and hungry. The first tall grass meadow he came to held him for some time. He was headed for the breaks above the Bar L, but a week slipped by without his making much progress in that direction. He followed a clear stream upward, feeding on the lush grass and regaining day by day his strength and sleekness.

The short, high country summer was slipping away. Beyond the breaks the granite peaks, rising treeless above the timber line, were blanketed in a coat of new snow. Chill air flowed down into the parks at night. The flowers and shrubs put on seed and berries in wild haste to accomplish their ends before the frost came.

The big buck deer began drifting down from the high places armed with shining new lances of bone, driven on by the wild call of the mating moon. Savage duels were fought at dusk and under the pale moon for the favors of the mild does. The great uneasiness which filled the air stirred Golden Boy. It filled him with a sudden desire to find Big Red and challenge him. Watching two great bull elk crash together in mortal combat sent him racing up the meadow.

As though to soothe this uneasiness, nature ushered in the days of Indian summer, warm and sunny, with soft winds blowing up out of the lower country. But the signs were posted and every dweller knew that this was only a breather. Each cast uneasy glances toward the crouching form of Sleepy Cat Mountain. Golden Boy had started his search for Big Red with much energy, but now the warm, lazy weather caused him to dally and to snatch tempting grass along the beaver streams.



13. *Indian Summer*

CHARLIE was kept very busy patrolling the high range. The old wolf had taken complete charge of the three dogs after Charlie had shot the old fellow who had been challenging her leadership. They were not full-grown but they were big fellows. They filled a need which was strong in the *she*-wolf, the need for a bachelor pack. Later, she would mate with one of them and again gray killers would run through the breaks as they had in the old days.

By keeping on the alert and using his rifle every time he caught a glimpse of one of the pack, Charlie had taught them to do their hunting high in the rough country. One of the youngsters carried a scar where a .30-30 bullet had missed his spine by inches; another limped from a bullet Charlie had placed a bit low when he got a snap shot at dawn one morning. These brushes with man and his rifle made the dogs see the wisdom of

the wolf's way of hunting: Raid the calf pastures only at night, fade into the rough country before dawn.

The grim battle with the pack kept Charlie from ranging very far in search of Trey Spot. He would have spent the whole summer hunting for her if he had not been possessed of a stubborn determination to prove to his father that he had the welfare of the Bar L at heart. There was one thing which made the loss of Trey Spot easier to bear and that was having Ellen Sprague ride with him much of the time.

Charlie taught her the ways of Western horses and Western saddles. She used Ann Carter's outfit because Mrs. Carter did not ride again after the trip to see Big Red. Grandby Carter gave Ellen a powder-blue mare he prized very highly. It wasn't long until Ellen was caring for the powder-blue herself, refusing to allow Charlie to rub her down or feed her.

The frequent visits of Dean Bailey to the ranch annoyed Charlie, but not too much, because Dean refused to go riding in the mountains or even along the valley trails. He just did not like horses, which suited Charlie because Ellen so obviously did.

Charlie had no brothers or sisters. He had never ridden with anyone except the men and with his mother, so that having someone his own age to accompany him was a new experience. He very quickly got over the idea that he must treat Ellen as a weak and helpless person. The Eastern girl was anything but an encumbrance, she was independent and determined to do things for herself.

Charlie showed her all of the special places he had come to know, the deep canyons and the high ridges,

the lookout points where they could sit in their saddles and look down over a vast country. She grew to love them almost as much as the boy who had known them all his life.

But it was not until the cows had been moved down to the ranch, away from the danger of the pack, that he was able to take her up into the breaks and show her Big Red and his herd. It was a long trip, and when he had to spend a morning patrolling there was never time enough because his mother insisted they had to be in before dark. She felt this was proper and that she owed it to her friend Connie Sprague to see that Ellen didn't run any risks on the trail after dark, even under the capable guidance of her own son.

The two young people set out for the breaks early one morning. They were well into the rough country before noon, and had an early lunch on the banks of a stream. Ellen was eager to see the wild herd. She had built up a picture in her imagination and was sure she knew what they would be like.

"Is Big Red such a scamp as your mother says?" she asked as she munched a sandwich.

Charlie grinned at her. "He'll steal Powder right out from under you if you give him half a chance," he replied. "But he's not really bad. He has to be tough and hard to protect his herd."

"I think Mrs. Carter rather admires him," Ellen said with a smile.

"Yes," Charlie agreed. "Mother has known him longer than I have."

Ellen jumped to her feet. "Let's move on right away," she cried eagerly.

They mounted and rode deeper into the rough country. Charlie halted at various points where they could check the little parks and mesas without being seen. After two hours of searching, the boy began to worry. He had seen no sign of Big Red or his mares. If they were not located soon, most of the return ride would have to be made after dark. Charlie had promised his mother to get Ellen home early.

"We may not locate them today," he said as they sat looking down over a grassy park.

"Oh, I hope we do!" Ellen exclaimed.

"I'm supposed to get you back to the ranch before dark," Charlie reminded her.

"But I may not get another chance to see them," Ellen said. "I'm leaving soon for home. I have to start back to school in a few weeks."

Charlie frowned. He did not like to think of her going. He might never see her again. After this year it would be college for them both. She might not care to spend another summer in the West. She'd be older and would fit into the sophisticated life of the city where she lived. He decided to risk spending another hour looking for Big Red.

An hour later he spotted two horses in a park far below them. Then he saw four more. A moment later he located Big Red standing on a knoll a short distance from the mares.

"There they are," he called to his companion, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Where?" Ellen asked eagerly. She wasn't able to locate the wild horses.

Charlie moved Diamond closer to Powder and

pointed. There was a touch of disappointment in Ellen's voice as she said, "They don't look very wild."

Charlie grinned. "We'll slip down there and surprise them, then you'll see how wild they are. You haven't seen wild horses until you've seen them break for cover with Big Red going into action."

As they circled down through the timber, Charlie began planning on a way to make it a good show for Ellen. If he could get close to Big Red he'd make the stallion put on a real show. Diamond could give the old veteran a close run.

They worked to the windward of the park. There was a grove of aspens which stood at the edge of the park near the rim of a small canyon. As usual Big Red was holding his herd near a canyon into which he could drive them for a quick escape. Charlie wanted Ellen to be in a position from which she could see everything that happened, so he left her near the edge of the aspen grove.

"Stay here and do not move into the open," he said. "I'll stampede the herd past you so you can see them in action."

Ellen looked out at the feeding mares. She still wasn't convinced that there was going to be much action. She couldn't see Big Red and the mares and colts looked like ordinary horses to her. At that moment Big Red trotted into the picture and stood at the far edge of the meadow with his head up. Ellen caught her breath as she looked at him. Then she shuddered.

"He's so ugly," she exclaimed, disappointed.

Charlie smiled. Her doubts made him determined to show her that these were really wild horses. "I'll circle

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around and when I break cover the old boy will go into action. Don't move or he'll see you and be off."

"You'll be careful?" Ellen wasn't sure she wanted him to leave her alone.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Charlie said, but he was pleased because she was beginning to take an interest in spite of herself.

"He looks mean and dangerous," she said. "I wouldn't want him to get close to me."

"He's a bad actor all right," Charlie said softly. "But he won't come near you."

He pulled Diamond around and eased back through the aspens. As he worked his way around the herd he paused often to check the movements of Big Red. He was close to the edge of the woods above the stallion when Big Red decided to move in that direction also. Charlie realized that in another moment the leader would see him. He was as close to Big Red as he had ever been. Shaking out his rope he gave a touch of his spurs. Diamond knew what to do when Charlie shook out his rope.

He came to life and lunged forward. Charlie stood up in his stirrups and swung his rope, shouting loudly to frighten Big Red. Diamond's rush carried him down upon the stallion before Big Red could move. It was a perfect chance to drop a loop over the neck of the wild horse. Charlie had not planned anything like this at all. He failed to make the split-second check which would have warned him of the danger. Obeying an impulse, he swung the loop. It sailed out in a perfect cast and landed over the head of the stallion.

The instant Diamond sat back and Big Red felt the

bite of the rope on his shaggy neck he exploded. Diamond struggled to tighten the noose, game in the face of the terrible screams which came from Big Red. The stallion reared and lashed at the rope. Charlie made a quick attempt to take up the slack.

Big Red had been roped before. But no rope had ever stayed on him more than a few minutes. He did not see the rope as his enemy, it was the horse and rider facing him he had to smash. He leaped at them, hoofs lashing, teeth bared.

Diamond had been through this act many a time before. He lunged to one side to escape the battering hoofs and the slashing teeth, but Big Red's hoofs were raised above him. They came smashing down and they caught Diamond broadside. Charlie felt the stunning impact as one hoof struck his hip. A searing stab of pain shot through him. Diamond lunged again and was clear. Charlie clutched at the saddle horn. He felt his rope whip free and snap away. He had a glimpse of Big Red towering above him as he slid out of the saddle and into a gray sea of shadows.

Up in the aspen grove Ellen sat frozen in her saddle, so frightened she could not move. Her eyes were fastened upon the scarred stallion as he reared up while Charlie was sliding from his saddle. Even after Charlie lay huddled and motionless on the ground she could not take her eyes off Big Red. His hoofs were poised over Charlie. With an angry toss of his head, he shook off the rope, then pivoted, and his forefeet hit the ground a yard from where Charlie lay. With a defiant scream he charged away after his herd which had vanished into the canyon.



She knelt beside him

Ellen wet her dry lips. She discovered she could move and with a stifled cry she sent Powder galloping across the meadow. Reaching Charlie, she slid from the saddle and knelt beside him. As she bent over him, his eyes opened and a smile formed on his white lips.

"I tried to show off," he said weakly.

"Charlie." Ellen's voice was tight, but there was relief in it. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Just shook up," Charlie said. Then he tried to sit up. The sudden pain made him drop back. He gave her a tight smile. "It's my hip. Must be bruised."

"I think it's broken." Ellen's voice trembled. She bent over him but did not touch the hip.

"Could be," Charlie said. "Big Red plays rough."

"He's a brute," Ellen said, her eyes snapping.

"I asked for it," Charlie said.

"What are we going to do?" Ellen asked.

"I'll have to get on Diamond," Charlie answered. "Once in the saddle I can get you home."

Ellen did not say anything for a few minutes. She knew she could never find her way out of this wild country without his help. And they were certain to be caught by darkness. She had a feeling Charlie should not try to ride.

"I'll help you," she said.

With her help Charlie managed to get to his feet. The pain was intense, but he gritted his teeth and tried not to show it. It took all of Ellen's strength and Charlie's courage to get him into his saddle. When he was seated in the saddle, the pain was more intense than he let Ellen know. He smiled at her and tried to make a joke of it. He had to get her to the main trail below the breaks.

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The ride out of the breaks was one Charlie would always remember. He fought off spells of dizziness, knowing that if he ever slipped out of the saddle he'd never get back into it again. He had to keep his senses clear in order to guide Ellen down to the head of Horse Thief Trail.

The sun had set by the time they reached the head of the trail leading down into Roaring River Canyon, but they made it. Then something inside of Charlie seemed to give away. He had been hanging on grimly, watching for the trail. When he saw it he lost the grip he had had on himself. He lay forward across Diamond's neck and let the black mists envelop him. Before he drifted away he felt Ellen's hand on his arm and heard her anxious voice.

"Charlie." She repeated his name. "Charlie."

When he did not answer she slid from her saddle and stood beside Diamond. Charlie did not move or open his eyes. When she tightened her grip on his arm, he stirred. She had to get hold of herself, because she had to get Charlie home, and he could not ride lying forward over the saddle horn. She remembered reading somewhere that shock often killed a person, that after a severe accident the patient should not be moved until a doctor and an ambulance arrived. She looked down the dark trail and then at Charlie's white face.

In desperation she shook him gently. He stirred and muttered something, then slid toward her. Ellen caught him and eased his fall. She had her arms around him and raised him enough to move him off the trail to a grassy spot under a tree. There she sat down beside him. In the dim light his face was just a white blur. She

bent over him fearfully. He was grinning up at her, a twisted grin that pulled at the corners of his mouth.

"Will you be safe here while I go for help?" she asked.

"Sure," Charlie said.

"I'll leave Diamond tied to a tree. Anybody passing will see him." She smiled reassuringly at him.

"Just drop his reins. He'll stay." Charlie drew in his breath carefully. "Keep right. Take no left-hand trails."

"I'll make it." She looked down at him for a minute. He might catch cold lying there in his shirt sleeves. She got her jacket from behind her saddle and spread it over him, then rolled up his slicker and put it under his head.

"Sorry I got you into this," Charlie said as she slid the crude pillow into place.

Ellen smiled. "I came out here looking for adventure. Remember?"

Charlie nodded. He closed his eyes for a moment as a stab of pain shook him. The darkness hid his face so that she did not see him flinch. She turned quickly and caught up Powder's reins. Diamond stood close to Charlie, his head lowered. Ellen knew the big horse would still be there when help arrived.

She pushed Powder as fast as she thought the mare ought to travel down the rocky trail. Powder was eager because she was headed home to a feed of oats. The trail soon broke off sharply into Roaring River Canyon. The half-light of the mesa changed to blue-blackness and the air was filled with the roar of the river. Ellen hung on and let Powder have her head.

The trip through the blackness of the canyon seemed

endless, though it was really less than an hour. At last Powder was angling up out of the canyon, and there was enough light to see rocks and trees along the trail. Ellen glanced fearfully at the looming masses of shadow near the timber. They all seemed to be alive and watching her. It was her first ride alone at night.

She told herself there was nothing to be afraid of. Charlie had often told her there was no wild animal that would harm a person. But she kept remembering Big Red. Charlie had said Big Red might try to steal Powder.

They came to where the trail branched and Ellen pulled Powder to a halt. One branch kept on almost straight ahead, the other turned sharply to the right. She was sure she should follow the trail which went straight ahead, but Charlie had said no left-hand trails. But this wasn't a left-hand trail, it went straight ahead. Powder wanted to take the right-hand trail, but Ellen was sure if they turned that way they would be heading back into the rough country.

She pulled Powder's head around and sent the mare straight ahead. Very soon the trail led into a heavy stand of timber and black shadows closed in around her. Again she had to trust Powder. She began to think she should have taken the right-hand trail. She pulled Powder around and started back.

Powder struck out at a fast pace. Soon they came out of the timber and the starlight revealed their surroundings dimly. Ellen pulled up hard on the reins. They were entering an open meadow and Ellen knew she had never been in that meadow before. She was lost! The thought hit her hard. Looking around, she had no idea

which way to go. The meadow was small and no matter which way she went she would have to enter heavy timber.

As she sat trying to figure out what to do, Powder jerked up her head and whinnied. Ellen caught her breath as a horse answered from the timber above. She thought of Big Red and panic seized her. If she dug her spurs into Powder they might escape. Then Powder whinnied again. Ellen jerked her bit sharply to silence her. This time the answering whinny was very close. Ellen pulled Powder around. Then a voice rang out:

"Hi, there!"

Ellen was so wildly relieved she could not answer. It was the voice of Tex Malone and a moment later he rode out of the timber. Ellen slumped weakly into her saddle. Tex shouted to someone:

"I've found her!"

A moment later Grandby Carter and Shorty appeared and she was telling her story to them. Carter reached out and patted her arm.

"Ann insisted we come looking for you kids," he said gently. "She must have had a hunch."

"I'll take you back, but please hurry," Ellen urged.

"Tex and I will go after Charlie," Carter said. "You can go on home with Shorty." He did not wait for her answer but whirled his horse and galloped into the blackness of the timber with Tex pounding along at his heels.

"How can he see to ride so fast?" Ellen asked.

"He can't," Shorty answered grimly. "But I reckon he ain't thinking about that."

"No," Ellen whispered.

"We'll start in," Shorty said.

"Could we wait for them?" Ellen asked.

"Shore," Shorty replied and seemed glad she had suggested it. Then he explained how she had come to get lost when she turned back. "Powder was just taking a short cutback to the trail."

"If I had let her alone she would have taken me straight to the ranch?" Ellen asked.

"She shore would," Shorty agreed. "When it comes to night going or blizzards, jest trust yore hoss."

An hour later the men appeared. Tex was leading Diamond. Grandby Carter had Charlie in his arms. Big as Charlie was, his father managed to hold him. The ride to the ranch took time because they moved at a walk.

When they arrived at the corral his mother was waiting with a gasoline lantern. She did not scream when Grandby swung out of his saddle with Charlie in his arms. She stepped close and looked up into her husband's face.

"He's going to be all right, Ann," Grandby said. "Run in and call Dr. Crittenden. Tell him it's a broken hip."

Mrs. Carter whirled and ran toward the house with Ellen at her side. For once the girl forgot to take care of Powder. Carter followed them and carried Charlie up to his room. While Ann Carter was getting the doctor on the phone Ellen stood near her.

When she had finished talking to the doctor she turned to the girl and slipped an arm around her. Ellen felt so let down that the tears started.

"Was it rugged?" Mrs. Carter asked gently.

"I made him go on," Ellen said. "He was going to turn back so we'd get home before dark."

"You saw Big Red?"

"Yes. He attacked Charlie."

"Charlie tried to rope him?" Ann Carter asked gently.

"He did rope him." Ellen's eyes started to sparkle. Then she shuddered.

Mrs. Carter patted her arm but did not speak. She wanted to go to Charlie but she knew that the girl was close to hysteria.

"So you see it was all my fault," Ellen added.

"Nonsense." Mrs. Carter laughed. "You don't know my men very well, Ellen. They are both apt to do foolish things. Now you go to the kitchen and fix yourself something hot to drink, and try to eat, too."

Ellen went to the kitchen. She didn't want anything to eat, but she knew Ann Carter wanted to be with her son.

Much later that evening Charlie lay listening to the doctor. "You'll be right here for at least two months, Charlie. After that we'll see."

Charlie nodded. He was glad it wasn't worse. The doctor turned to Ann Carter. "I'll check you over, Ann, while I'm here."

They left the room together. Grandby Carter remained. He stood beside the bed looking down at his son and all of the harshness was gone from his face.

"It was a fool thing to do," Charlie said. "I was grand-standing."

His father nodded his head slowly.

"Like I did when I went after the silvertip," Charlie added.

Another nod.

"The slide got the bear and just about got me and Patric." Charlie watched his father's face.

Grandby Carter smiled down at him. "You are your mother's son," he said. "She was always pulling foolish stunts."

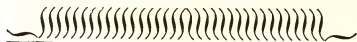
Charlie felt warm inside. He grinned up at his father. "You'll have Tex and Shorty keep an eye open for Trey Spot?"

"We'll be on the lookout for her." Grandby Carter reached for the drop cord and switched off the ceiling light, leaving the bed lamp burning. Then he left the room.

Charlie lay looking at the ceiling, listening to the steady throbbing of the little light plant which furnished electricity for the house. He wondered if Ellen would come and see him before she went to bed.

Ellen and his mother did look in later but Charlie was sound asleep, lulled by the sedative the doctor had given him.





14. The Challenge

GOLDEN BOY moved up through the cow range into the broken ridges of the spruce belt. He was sleek and filled with energy. Entering the breaks, he worked his way from park to park and then began checking the little mesas higher up. He did not find Big Red in any of the places where the herd had stayed while he was with them. After his meeting with Charlie, Big Red had led his herd into higher, more inaccessible country.

Now the golden stallion was as impatient as the buck deer and the bull elk. He whinnied as he galloped along and he fed impatiently when he halted. His calls went unanswered but he kept on searching. The meadows became smaller and the grass shorter. There were few aspen groves now, only balsam, spruce, and hemlock. This was truly high country.

At last he located the herd in a snug valley. Big Red

had picked the valley as a refuge, not against man, but against the coming winter. It was a box canyon, circled by high rims. At its upper end a stream flowed through a narrow slash in the walls. At the lower end the walls closed in to the very edge of the stream, forming a gateway. Here the herd could be held easily when the storms came, and there would be shelter from the bitter winds.

Golden Boy splashed through the gateway where the stream flattened into a wide riffle. He would not have entered but for the horse smell which funneled down out of the canyon. He sent a shrill challenge ringing upward. It echoed along the cliff walls and the mares heard it. Big Red heard it and his angry answer came echoing back to the young palomino as he arched his neck and galloped upward. He plunged through a stand of scrub willow and swept around a small beaver lake to break into the open at the edge of a long meadow.

Swinging to his right he came to a halt on a grassy knoll. Big Red stood at the edge of a balsam grove where he had been letting the slanting sun beat through his shaggy coat. For a moment he stood staring across at the golden stallion. For once Big Red hesitated before breaking to the attack. He seemed to realize that this was the hour which would decide the fate of one of them. No longer was this youngster a colt who could be driven off. He must be smashed and broken.

As they faced each other, the sun which had been shining a few moments before was dimmed and a cold shadow swept across the narrow meadow. Low scud-

ding clouds fanned out from the rims above. The clouds boiled like muddy water over a dam. Then the wind they were riding sucked down into the valley. The blast was icy cold. It stirred the heavy coats of the stallions and flared the manes and tails of the mares. For a moment it caused the two stallions to pause because it was the breath of a common enemy.

Golden Boy made the first move. Shaking his head he sounded his challenge. Big Red answered and they both leaped forward. As their bodies crashed together, the first wall of driven snow swirled around them. It was fine snow, as fine as powdered ice. The mares turned their backs to the blast and to the battle, lowering their heads as they humped their backs. Big Red and Golden Boy did not notice the snow at all. They had rocked backward after the first impact. Big Red's teeth ripped at the youngster's neck, and blood darkened the blond chest. But Golden Boy smashed him back with his heavy hoofs. Big Red grunted savagely as the blows battered him. He reared and struck back.

Then, as though at a signal from an unseen referee, they whirled and separated. Without pause they charged again, and their bodies met in solid jarring impact, solid flesh and bone against solid flesh and bone. Their hoofs lashed out and their teeth snapped savagely. Their maddened cries rose above the wail of the storm. Golden Boy was faster and landed more blows, but Big Red was heavier and he was driven by the fury of desperation. He must kill his rival or go down himself. He seemed to sense that this was his last great battle.

Again and again they crashed together screaming

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and slashing. Golden Boy felt the blows but not the pain. He was filled with a fury which would not be denied. Big Red felt the impact and the pain very little, but he did feel the weakness in his legs which was slowing his attack, and the tightness inside him which was shortening his breath. Slowly he began to give ground. As he backed away, Golden Boy bored in even more savagely, battering him back step by step.

With a last desperate rally Big Red hurled himself at Golden Boy, catching the youngster off balance. Flushed with success he sent the young stallion staggering backward, then, following up the advantage, he was on Golden Boy with all of the fury left in him. Golden Boy gave ground until he could get set, then he charged.

Big Red had had his chance and he had failed to knock the youngster off his feet. Now he stumbled back as Golden Boy leaped at him with an attack as powerful as his first rush had been. A great weariness was creeping through the scarred veteran's body. He was barely able to defend himself and could give no thought to attack. Slowly he retreated down the valley. Golden Boy was fresh and eager to finish his rival, but Big Red stubbornly refused to go down. He kept moving back, weaving and staggering but staying on his feet.

He retreated around the little beaver lake and into the shallows of the stream. Suddenly Golden Boy stopped as though he expected Big Red to charge him, but Big Red backed through the gateway and into the wall of swirling snow. Golden Boy shook his head. For the first time he seemed to notice he was shut inside a

white world. He could not see a tree or any other landmark. With a defiant blast he whirled and raced up the meadow toward the mares.

Big Red limped through the storm. He was staggering along not caring where he was headed. Like many a stallion that he had battered and smashed in the days of his prime, he was retreating to some lonely spot where he could recover from his wounds.

The old wolf and her three dogs caught the smell of blood as he limped past a ledge where they were challenging the storm. For a half hour they had been hurling defiance to the Storm King, yelping gleefully as they stood on a bare rock with the wind and the snow lashing into their bared fangs.

The pack was hungry because their wary leader had been keeping them high in the breaks away from the guns of the Bar L riders. The deer and the elk had moved down to better pastures, leaving them only rabbits and other small game which were not easily caught. Their bellies were empty and the smell of blood roused them. The old she-wolf leaped from the rock with the dogs bounding after her.

They raced through the gray wall of whirling snow until they saw Big Red, then they fanned out. The she-wolf knew instinctively that this was their chance to make a kill. Here was a cripple and cripples have always been nature's gift to the wolf pack. Big Red did not see them until they were upon him. Then he backed slowly around to face them. He had always treated wolves with contempt and hatred, and he still had a low opinion of them, but in turning he stumbled and almost fell. His battered shoulder refused to support one leg.

The wolf leaped behind him and tried to hamstring him by slashing the muscles of his hind leg. The dogs leaped at his face. He smashed out and sent one of them rolling, but the others leaped in with such fury that he could not turn to shake the wolf from his rear. Slowly he worked his way toward a cliff wall where he could get his back to solid protection.

The odds, however, were against him. The she-wolf was savage and cunning in such a fight. Her slashing fangs cut away the supporting muscles in his hind legs. Big Red floundered and went down. Still lashing and biting he kept on fighting, but the pack swarmed over him. He died as he had lived, fighting savagely, giving no quarter.

Up in the valley Golden Boy was prancing around, showing off for the benefit of the mares. They had crowded into a grove on the lee side of a rocky wall. They admitted his leadership, but showed no response to his playfulness. This was a very depressing hour for them. Winter had come and hard days lay ahead. Only the half-grown colts and fillies showed any interest in the new leader. They kicked up their heels and dashed about when he chased them.

The cold wind died away as quickly as it had come. The mares raised their heads and shook the powdered snow from their shaggy coats. With the wind stilled, the snow now came down in large flakes which floated to earth like white feathers. They were so close together that they blotted out trees and shrubs more than ten feet from a horse. A great silence filled the world as the brown grass of the meadow disappeared, and round boulders along the stream became white mounds.

The horses crowded together and stood waiting. Then the bay mare shook herself and walked out into the meadow where she pawed aside the snow and started pulling dry grass. One by one the others followed her. Golden Boy galloped once more around his herd, then he, too, dropped his head and started feeding.

Down at the Bar L, Charlie sat in a big chair at the front window. He watched the snow as it floated down. His mother came in with a bowl of broth. She smiled brightly as she set the broth on the stand beside his chair. She was worried but was determined not to show it. This was the first time since he had learned to walk at an early age that Charlie had not been out in the first snow of the season. He shoved aside a letter he had been writing to Ellen.

"I wonder where Trey Spot is," he said.

"Safe in some valley with Golden Boy," she answered.

"He never did come back," Charlie said. "I was so sure he would."

"The boys never had time to ride the high country," his mother reminded him. "I think you'll find him up there next spring."

Charlie suddenly grinned up at her. She had a sure way of bucking him up, but she wasn't fooling him, though he was willing to let her go on thinking he didn't know exactly what lay ahead of him. He had talked it over with Dr. Crittenden. At first the doctor had been evasive because he had promised Ann and Grandby he would not tell Charlie. But when the boy insisted, he gave in and told him because he thought in a case like

this a boy had a right to know and to start getting adjusted. The injured hip might leave him permanently crippled. He might never be able to ride again. The doctor was so nearly sure of his diagnosis that he felt Charlie should start getting a new outlook on life.

Ann Carter was looking anxiously into the storm. Grandby and Shorty had gone to town and should have been back several hours ago. The snow on the pass would soon be too deep for the Buick. Charlie read her thoughts.

"I think I hear a car," he said.

"I can't hear one," she replied anxiously.

But a minute later she too heard the car, and soon it rolled out of the storm and stopped at the gate. Grandby and Shorty got out and started bringing in the boxes of supplies Grandby had purchased.

After they had lugged the boxes into the pantry they came into the living room. Charlie stared at Shorty, then he grinned. Shorty had a very black eye.

"Where'd you get the shiner?" Charlie asked.

His father laughed and the laugh made Charlie look at him. It had been months since Grandby Carter had laughed like that. Shorty pushed his big hat back on his head.

"I run into a fist with a feller named Hackett on one end of it," he said.

Charlie looked quickly at his father but Grandby Carter wasn't frowning, he was chuckling, and he crossed the room to the big chair. "Buck Kent was in town drunk and Shorty got confidential with him. Buck admitted that Hackett had shot the bullet through his plane to frame you."

For a long minute their eyes met and Charlie knew that his father wanted to tell him he was sorry and to say other things, too. He didn't mind when his father wasn't able to speak what was in his heart. He just smiled up at him warmly and said, "How does that account for Shorty's beautiful mouse?"

"Hackett heard what Buck said, and it shore got his mad up," Shorty explained. "Things got sort of complicated for a spell, and with one thing and another I forgot to duck."

Charlie laughed. He knew Shorty was somewhat of a bear cat when he got really riled. "What does Hackett look like?" he asked.

Shorty frowned and shuffled his feet uncomfortably as he cast a glance in Ann Carter's direction. But she was too happy to scold him. She had caught the look which had passed between father and son. It was Grandby who answered Charlie's question.

"He'll be around again in a few days."

Shorty got red in the face. "Guess I better run the car into the shed before she gets snowed under," he said, and made for the door.

As the door clicked shut silence filled the room. Ann moved over and Grandby slipped an arm around her. They stood close to the big chair and there was no need for talk.





15. White Famine

WHITE DEATH faced many of the dwellers of the high country after the snows came. The old wolf and her dogs were always hungry. They ran far, but their kills were few. The cougars made long foraging trips deeper and deeper into the lower country. Only the bears enjoyed the winter. Years ago they had given up the battle against the white famine. They simply curled up in a den and lived off the fat accumulated during the summer.

Golden Boy and his mates dug down through the snow to uncover dry grass and young seedlings. They foraged on willow and alder twigs along the frozen stream. Their ribs pushed against their shaggy hides, raising ridges. The new leader always stood by ready to fight off the pack and the cougars.

Two of the older mates lay down during a storm and never got to their feet again. They went to sleep and the

bitter cold crept through their bodies, lulling them into a numbness from which they could not be roused by the stallion. For a time after that storm the wolf and her dogs feasted on frozen horse meat.

One of the colts left the herd and wandered close to an overhanging ledge. On the ledge a cougar had been keeping watch for many hours, hoping that a colt would wander near. When the colt paused to nip at a bush clinging to the rock, the cougar leaped. With a quick blow he broke the colt's neck. Golden Boy came plunging through the snow to the rescue and the cougar leaped away. But the colt was dead and in the end the cougar got its meal, though it was cheated of the hot blood of its victim because Golden Boy guarded the carcass for more than an hour.

Golden Boy's fury that day was a beautiful thing to see. He smashed at the trunk of the tree the cougar had climbed. He tore great holes in the snowbanks. The cougar lay on a limb, its yellow eyes following the stallion, no part of it moving except the black tip of its tail.

Golden Boy refused to let the mares leave the sheltered valley. He did not know why he kept them there, but keep them he did. They would have turned their tails to any storm and drifted before it if he had let them have their way.

Even the snowy owls suffered from the famine. The grouse burrowed down under the snow and the rabbits refused to venture out of the willow thickets. The owls beat along the edge of the timber at dusk, their round glassy eyes watching for any sign of movement. In their savage hunger they attacked any living thing.

Down on the desert to the south the winter was not so severe, but forage for horses was not plentiful. Bekis did the best he could for Trey Spot. He was very proud of the mare and treated her very well according to Navaho standards. He easily won every race they entered. He was considered a very wealthy young man because he possessed such a fine horse.

Trey Spot did not take readily to the Navaho ways. She missed her grain and rack of timothy hay. But she was better off than she had been in the desert with Golden Boy. Bekis spent much time with her and tried to see that she found enough grass to keep her from getting thin and bony. He dared not turn her loose with Willie Yellow Man's mares because he was afraid she would head for home.

When he decided that she was going to foal, he was very much excited. Willie agreed that she would probably have a colt and said it would belong to Bekis. They knew it would be a fine colt because the golden stallion was its father. Bekis looked forward to added wealth and standing in the clan.

If Charlie in his chair before the front window at the Bar L ranch house could have seen Bekis and Trey Spot he would not have worried about her. But he was sure she must be snow-locked in some high valley where the drifts were piled as high as six feet on the meadows. He was sure so high-strung a mare could not win in the bitter fight against a range winter. Trey Spot had never known what it was to forage for herself.

He tried to write to Ellen about it but tore up the letter. Instead he described the feed lot where the Herefords were given hay every day. Charlie could see the

feed lot from his window. The Herefords were hardy cattle. They put on shaggy coats of hair which kept out the cold. At night they bawled mournfully, but they did not suffer. Instead of getting lank and bony during the winter they put on fat.

Ellen's letters were bright spots during the dreary weeks while he was waiting for the day when he could move about on crutches. The doctor came regularly but went away without promising anything. All he would say was, "We may know for sure by April."

There was nothing to do but wait. He did what school work he could, but he knew he was going to lose a year which he would have to make up before he could go to college. Being cheerful before his mother and father kept him from feeling sorry for himself.

Finally the day came when he could try the crutches his father had bought him. He started mastering the art of swinging his game leg as he moved about. Dr. Crittenden said, "Keep at it. Make that leg work."

Charlie kept at it grimly, but the leg did not respond. There was no pain now, just a numb stiffness which made the leg completely useless.

Then came the day when he could go outside. He would be allowed to do anything a person in his condition could do. Dr. Crittenden said there was no reason why he shouldn't have a try at anything he wanted to do. He was waiting in the chair by the window until it was time to make his first trip to the barn.

His mother came in from the kitchen. She looked out through the window at the glittering winter scene. "This kind of day always looks colder than it really is," she said.

Charlie nodded. He had never thought about a day looking colder, but as he looked out over the snow scene, with the pale sunlight barely making shadows, he realized that she was right. One day could look colder than another, no matter what the thermometer read.

Grandby and Tex and Shorty came in for dinner. The Bar L needed only two hired hands during the winter so the extra men had been paid off and had gone. Tex grinned at Charlie.

"Hi, boy," he said heartily.

"How's tricks?" Shorty asked.

"Fine and snug," Charlie answered. "It does me a lot of good sitting here watching you shovel hay."

"Twenty-eight below," Tex said. "She'll probably hit forty come sundown."

Ann Carter appeared at the kitchen door. The Carter kitchen was big and during the winter the family and the men always ate there.

"Come and get it!" she called. She had been doing her own cooking and housework for the past month. Grandby had objected, but she had laughed at him.

Grandby Carter made a motion to help Charlie, but he waved him aside. "I'll make it," he said cheerfully.

They tried not to watch him too anxiously as he got his crutches under his arms. Shorty sauntered toward the kitchen. Grandby chuckled encouragingly. Charlie swung along easily, being careful to keep his body in balance.

He grinned at his mother. He had to make this look good or he'd have someone helping him when he went outside. He didn't want that to happen.

"Nothing to it," he boasted as he passed her.

And when he reached the table he tried not to show what the effort had cost him in getting there. He was determined to be on his own.

After dinner was over he got up and walked back to the front room. As he sank into the big chair by the window he felt a faint beading of moisture on his forehead. There was no pain, it was because the leg dragged so helplessly, as though it were not a part of him at all. He'd just have to keep trying. He had to lick this thing!

An hour later he was bundled up in a sheep-lined coat and his mother was tucking a muffler around his neck. She held open the front door. Charlie swung through and out on the porch. Ann Carter kept her worries to herself and smiled encouragingly at her son before closing the door.

"Put a light in the window for me," he called back.

She laughed. That was an expression Grandby used when he planned to be out late at night. It was one of those expressions two people have and own between them. It pleased her to have Charlie borrow it.

She closed the door and moved to the window where she could watch his progress toward the barn. Charlie moved carefully but at a steady pace. He caught a glimpse of his father standing behind one of the feed racks in the horse corral. Charlie might have rested between the house and the barn if they had not been watching him.

He got to the barn and slid the door back far enough to enter. Standing inside, he sniffed eagerly. The smells in the barn were good—the hay smell and the horse

smells. Shorty had just finished cleaning the gutters and was scattering clean straw in the stalls. Charlie caught the faint ammonia smell from the gutters. He laughed softly as he remembered what Ellen had said the first time she had entered the horse barn.

"They smell."

He had thought it funny at the time, but she had assured him that Eastern riding academy horses did not smell horsey. Moving to Diamond's stall he greeted the big horse.

"Hello, big boy."

Diamond turned his head and cocked his ears forward. Charlie thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a carrot. He eased himself into the stall beside the horse. Shorty hovered near, pretending to scatter straw. He was trying hard not to give advice, but he finally said, "He hain't been ridden lately. Might be jumpy."

Charlie slid a hand along Diamond's neck. He offered the carrot and Diamond nipped off half of it and started munching. He lowered his big head and swung it against Charlie. It was a gesture of friendliness, but it upset Charlie's balance.

One crutch slipped and he sprawled helplessly under Diamond's belly in the straw. Shorty stepped in fast. His voice came steady and reassuring:

"Easy, boy, easy."

Diamond jerked back a step. A forefoot touched Charlie and the horse stood still. The big head lowered and Diamond picked up the carrot Charlie had dropped when he fell.

Charlie let Shorty help him out of the stall. He laughed ruefully. Shorty squinted and scowled. "I'd have bet he'd shore stomp you."

"Not Diamond," Charlie said. "I'm going to ride him just as soon as I lick these crutches."

"Better start on Powder or Blackie," Shorty advised.

"It will be Diamond," Charlie said. Then he faced Shorty. "But don't you go telling anyone."

"I'll keep my yap shut," Shorty promised. "But you better start on Blackie."

Charlie shook his head. He wandered about the barn talking to the other horses and wound up at the box stall where Kelly was kept during the winter. Kelly snorted and arched his neck. Kelly had his points, but he wasn't even close to Golden Boy in quality. He wondered if the day would ever come when he'd stop at the box stall and find the golden stallion in it. It didn't seem likely the way things had turned out.

Leaving the barn, he hobbled around to the stack-yard and rode the bobsled to the feed lot with Tex. He was very tired when he got back to the house. The big chair by the window looked very inviting.

The next day Charlie was out again. He was getting the hang of the crutches now and he wasn't being watched so closely because he had shown that he could take care of himself.

When Tex and Carter drove away with a load of hay for the Herefords, Charlie approached Shorty.

"How about saddling Diamond for me?"

Shorty stuck the dung fork into a pile of litter he was about to toss into the overhead carrier. His lean face tightened into a frown. He was thinking it *would* be his luck to be on barn cleaning detail that week. When he did not answer at once, Charlie urged: "I'll try it back of the barn where the snow is deep. If I tumble off I'll land in a drift."

Shorty's eyes began to twinkle. "You win," he said. "But I'm liable to get fired."

"You won't get fired," Charlie replied. "I have to know and I may as well get it over with now."

Shorty nodded. He left the barn and when he returned he had Charlie's saddle and bridle over his shoulder. He saddled Diamond and bridled him. Charlie was at the back door, waiting with it open.

Back of the barn the snow lay three feet deep. It was not crusted and offered a very fine landing mat in case he could not stay in the saddle. He had figured out exactly how he would mount by himself. He knew Diamond would be cagey after standing in a stall so long without exercise. The snapping cold would make him even more touchy.

Shorty stepped forward to help, but Charlie waved him back. He set one crutch in the snow and balanced himself by holding to the saddle horn with one hand and using the remaining crutch as a brace. He held the reins in the hand gripping the horn.

Diamond shifted uneasily as Charlie lifted his sound foot to the stirrup. With an effort he pulled himself upward until his weight was on the saddle. Then he reached down and caught hold of the game leg, swinging it around. There was a quick twinge of pain as he settled into the saddle, but his elation at having mounted kept him from noticing it.

The two crutches remained sticking up in the snow when he rode away. Shorty's grim frown changed into a broad grin, and he waved his hat wildly as Diamond danced away, fighting the tight rein Charlie held on him. He pranced around the barn two-stepping like a cir-

cus horse. A sense of elation filled Charlie. He knew he was going to be able to ride no matter how clumsy he was on the ground.

Casting aside caution he let Diamond out a little. The jolting, as the horse trotted, hurt a little but not too severely. The jolting was bad because the game leg refused to lift him clear of the seat. He headed Diamond toward the feed lot and let him break into a lope, which was more comfortable than the trot. Diamond would have none of that lazy pace. He broke into a gallop and swept across the hard-packed snow. Charlie did not pull him in.

Grandby Carter was on top of the load of hay, pushing it off while Tex drove the bobsled. When he saw Charlie coming, he let the fork slide off the load along with the hay. He stood up straight and watched his son come galloping toward the closely packed white-faced cattle.

Charlie pulled up beside the load of hay and grinned at his father. Tex had squirmed around and was staring open-mouthed at him.

"Figured Diamond needed exercise," Charlie said, trying to make his voice sound casual.

Suddenly Grandby Carter started grinning. The grin ended in a laugh. Tex joined him. Charlie rubbed Diamond's neck. He was aware of a dull ache in his hip, and knew he'd better be getting back to the barn, but he did not want his father or Tex to know the saddle bothered him.

"Don't take on too much this first time," his father advised.

"I'm going back right away," Charlie answered.

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"I just wanted to be sure I could do it." He headed Diamond back toward the barn.

Back of the barn he pulled up where he had left his crutches sticking in the snow. Now he had to get out of the saddle and he had not given that part of it much thought. He caught hold of the game leg and hoisted it over Diamond's rump. That left him on his stomach across the saddle. He reached down and got hold of the crutches. It looked easy, but Diamond was a tall horse and when he suddenly shifted aside, Charlie found he had a long way to lower himself before the crutches hit him under the arms. He came down on them hard and could not keep his balance. He made a try but failed and plunged face down into the snow.

Shorty came running, but Charlie had struggled up out of the snow and had the crutches under his armpits before Shorty got to him. He wiped the snow from his face and grinned at the stocky cow hand.

"I'll get it down pat," he said.

"My money says you will," Shorty agreed.

He hobbled through the deep snow while Shorty led Diamond, and stayed in the barn until the horse was unsaddled. When he started toward the house he saw his mother's face at the kitchen window, and knew she had seen him riding. She opened the front door for him.

"You should have asked the doctor before trying to ride," she said, unable to control her anxiety.

"He told me I had to try to make the leg work," Charlie said as he moved into the living room. He kept a grip on himself, but he felt weak and shaky. His mother helped him out of his coat and he did not ob-

ject. After he had sunk into the big chair he grinned up at her. "It was fine. Nothing to it!"

"With that spirit nothing can lick you, son." She patted his arm and hurried out to get the hot chocolate she had made for him.

After she left the room he closed his eyes. He was very tired and his hip ached dully. He drank the hot chocolate his mother brought and was well satisfied to spend the rest of the day in the big chair.

That night he did not sleep very well, and the next morning he was too stiff and sore to go outside. He had planned to ride every day but decided he had better take things a little more slowly.

His mother and father said nothing about his not going outside the next day. But Charlie knew they had talked it over and would probably call Dr. Crittenden. Later in the day Ann Carter did call the doctor. Charlie could not hear what she said because the phone was in the kitchen, but what the doctor said to her evidently eased her mind, because she was smiling when she entered the living room a few minutes later.

Charlie did not complain about his hip's hurting. He was sure that if he kept working and trying he would get so he could ride, and do things from the saddle. He was determined to ride, even if he never did walk without crutches. Like any real cattleman he felt it was more important to be able to ride than to be able to walk.



16. *Spring*

SPRING came slowly to the high country. In the sheltered valley where Golden Boy held his mares the snow melted from the open meadows weeks before it vanished from less sheltered parts of the range. With new grass and weeds shoving up tantalizing stems the mares became restless. They could smell the new grass but could get only a taste. They would have roamed far, seeking better pastures, if Golden Boy had let them.

Some instinct kept the golden stallion in the valley. March storms, with a brief return of winter, proved that he was wise. He liked the security of the towering cliffs which walled his retreat. It reminded him of the canyon of the dead far to the south. He was watchful of the mares who were soon to foal.

Spring brought a revival of life in the wild country. The coyotes ran in pairs and the big cats prowled and fought noisy love fights under the stars. The little folk

of the bush came out and scampered about. The stark shadow of hunger faded with the coming of warm days. A shaggy old bear came down out of a cave on the south wall. He was gaunt and looked hungry but all he ate when he first appeared was a mouthful or two of dirty snow. Golden Boy watched him warily but did not attack him.

The bear was not interested in meat. He paid no attention to the mares or the colts when they broke and fled to high ground where they stood watching him as he lumbered down the valley toward the gateway.

When the grass was tall enough for grazing, Golden Boy allowed the herd to leave the valley and feed in the meadows below. But he held them near enough to the refuge so that he could stampede them into it if need be.

It was while they were feeding in a small park below the valley that Tex and Shorty sighted them. They were not looking for wild horses and the two cowboys rode out of the timber and came upon the herd unexpectedly. They sat watching Golden Boy stampede the mares up a small stream and into heavy timber. Tex looked at Shorty, who was staring after the herd.

"Charlie was right. That young stallion is some horse," he said.

"Some horse? I'll say he's some horse, but he's no wild one," Shorty agreed, then he added slowly, "Trey Spot wasn't with them."

"No." Tex frowned. "Probably didn't make it through the winter. Notice how poor those mares are?"

"Yeah," Shorty said and scowled. He was thinking about Charlie, wondering what to tell him.

"Wonder where Big Red's herd is. Two bunches up here are too many," Tex remarked.

"That was Big Red's harem," Shorty answered. "I spotted several ranch mares in it."

Tex grinned. "The palomino took over. I'd like to have seen that scrap."

"Shore must have been a bloody mess," Shorty said. "Shall we trail 'em?"

Tex glanced up at the sun, then shook his head. "We better shove along. Taking this short cut hasn't saved us much time."

As they rode toward the ranch they were both thinking the same thought—they'd like to catch the golden stallion. They both knew Grandby Carter wasn't apt to take time off from the rush of spring work to round up wild horses, but the stallion was a prize. Shorty's practiced eye told him Golden Boy was no ordinary wild horse. He was big and nervous and he looked wild enough, but there was every indication he wasn't a killer like Big Red. Mack and Ernie were back at work on the ranch again, but even so there was plenty of work, so a horse hunt did not seem to be in the cards at this season of the year.

When they rode up to the corral, Charlie was seated in front of the saddle house working on a stirrup. He had his crutches propped against the wooden bench. He was riding every day now. When he rode he carried his crutches in the gun boot. He looked up and grinned as the boys swung out of their saddles. Tex gave him a big smile.

"Saw your golden stallion today, son," he said.

"You did?" Charlie dropped the stirrup strap he was lacing. "Where?"

"High in the breaks on Canna Creek. He's taken over Big Red's mares." Tex shoved his hat back on his forehead and added, "Some horse."



Charlie was working on a stirrup

Shorty had been slow to say anything. He was fumbling at the cinch strap, slipping it loose. "He's a honey," he said. "A champ if I ever saw one."

Charlie picked up the stirrup strap and looked at it closely. Then he raised his eyes to Tex's face and asked the question that had been on his tongue from the first. "Was Trey Spot with them?"

"No," Tex replied, and let it go at that.

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Shorty jerked the cinch loose and yanked the saddle off his horse. He gave the roan an unusually hard slap on the rump and sent him bouncing into the corral. Charlie bent and started lacing the strap. Tex turned to his horse.

"Somebody must have picked her up," Shorty said gruffly. "They'll bring her over soon as they get around to it."

"That's the way I figure it," Tex agreed.

Charlie knew they were just talking. He said, "Sure." He knew what they really believed, just what he himself thought. If any rancher had picked her up he would have phoned the Bar L. The ranchers all had telephones and they all knew Trey Spot because she had won the big race the year before.

Tex and Shorty went to the barn to get grain for their horses. Charlie jerked the last inch of thong into place and smoothed the lacing with his thumb. He pulled himself upright and reached for his crutches. Diamond was hitched to the corral. He made his way to the horse and shoved the crutches into the rifle boot, then crawled into the saddle. Diamond had learned not to ease away from Charlie when he mounted, so getting into the saddle was no trick at all. He rode out of the yard just as Tex and Shorty came out of the barn with the nose bags.

Tex shook his head. "He does all right," he said.

"Shore plenty of sand," Shorty said gruffly. "Most men, to say nothing of a kid, would have quit cold."

Tex opened the corral gate and shook the oats in the nose bag. "He took it good."

Shorty kicked a stick out of his path. "I'd have given

a summer's pay if that black mare had been in the herd."

Charlie let Diamond gallop across the horse pasture and up on a ridge, where he pulled up and sat looking over the ranch buildings and corrals. His gaze moved along the river and over the foothills to the breaks below the timber line. He was eager to see Golden Boy again, but it was too late to start out that day. But he would go, he would camp out. He couldn't blame Golden Boy for what had happened to Trey Spot, he could only blame himself.

As he rode on along the ridge he kept thinking of Trey Spot. He was remembering the piles of gnawed bones he had so often found in the high country after the snow had gone. Each was a marker which told of a tragedy to some member of a herd.

Swinging down into the valley where the cows and new calves were pastured, Charlie noticed a calf lying near a fallen tree. He swung Diamond in close because there seemed to be something wrong with the way the calf was lying. Looking down as Diamond halted he saw that the little fellow had its head caught under a limb. Its neck was twisted and it was choking. Its eyes were rolling and its legs kicking feebly.

Charlie's reaction was swift. He had to leap from the saddle and free the calf before it choked to death. He forgot his game leg and started to swing down from the saddle in the manner of the old days. Suddenly he realized that he was lifting the game leg; it was rising without his taking hold of it. For an instant he forgot the calf as he realized the leg was working.

He swung the leg over Diamond's back and slid to

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the ground. With an awkward lurch he dropped beside the calf and broke the dead limb clear of the tree. The calf rolled over and lay panting. Charlie sank down upon the log. He was shaking as though taken with a chill. The calf kicked and then let out a bawl. Charlie started laughing. The calf sucked air into its lungs and staggered to its feet. Its mother came galloping up out of a meadow with the clumsy action of a beef cow in a big hurry.

Charlie sank his fingers into the flesh of his hip. It felt numb the way it had always felt since it was hurt, but it had moved by itself. He was afraid to stand up, to try to use it. At last he did get to his feet and was able to balance himself. He took a step with the good leg, then tried to make the game leg take a step. It refused and he would have fallen if Diamond had not been close enough to save him. But this did not kill the wild eagerness inside him. It had worked and it would work again. He would make it come back to life.

The ride back to the ranch was a wild one. Diamond sensed the excitement in Charlie and galloped madly across the pasture. At the barn door Grandby Carter stood watching Charlie ride in. Thinking one of the boys must have had an accident he started forward on a run. Charlie pulled Diamond to a halt as they met.

"Look!" he shouted. Setting his teeth he leaned away from the saddle. Slowly the game leg lifted and swung over Diamond's rump. In his eagerness he would have fallen on his face when his boots hit the ground if Grandby had not caught him. His father's voice was strangely tight as his arm gripped Charlie's shoulders.

"Good going, son. You've got it licked."

"I'll keep at it. I'll throw away the crutches one of these days."

His father nodded. He did not trust his voice at the moment. Finally he said with a grin, "Your mother will want to see you do that."

Charlie mounted again and rode up to the house. He pulled up at the gate and called to his mother. When she stepped out on the porch he carefully dismounted before her, swinging down close to the gate so he could steady himself. Ann Carter did not have the strong reserve of her husband. She didn't try to hide the tears as she ran down the steps. When she started to fling her arms around him, he caught her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. He grinned down at her and she was startled because he was so much taller than she. She hadn't noticed it before. He's a man, she thought, and he has all of Grandby's stubbornness.

"It won't be long now until I'm as good as new," he said.

But it wasn't so easy as he had thought it would be. He still needed one crutch to get about. But he kept working with the leg, trying to make it respond. At times he was sure there was a big improvement, then he had blue spells when he was just as sure it wasn't any better than the day when he had saved the calf.

He put off his trip into the high country for a while, giving all of his time to the leg. Finally he put away the crutch and used a cane. He was certain now that he needed no help. He was ready to ride into the breaks to look for Golden Boy.

The morning he left he was up before daybreak. Shorty helped him cinch an outfit on a pack horse. He

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told his father he was ready to start hunting the wolf and her pack. The boys had spotted the killers and trouble was expected.

But this trip was not a wolf hunt. Later, when the cows were shoved up on the high range, he would take up the battle with the she-wolf. He headed straight for the breaks and by midafternoon he was riding up Canna Creek keeping a sharp watch for Golden Boy and his herd. He located them high up where Canna Creek flowed out of a tight valley. He got only a glimpse of Golden Boy because he wanted to get the wind just right and make sure he wasn't seen. He hitched the pack horse in heavy cover before moving around the herd.

His first full sight of Golden Boy made his pulses pound. The stallion was standing guard on high ground, his mane and tail flowing in the wind. He was even more mature, more beautiful than Charlie had remembered him. He lacked the brute power and ugly squareness of Big Red, and Charlie almost had a feeling that if he should ride out and call to him, Golden Boy would know him.

Charlie was so taken with the stallion that he forgot all about the mares. One of them now moved into the aspen grove where Charlie was sitting. She halted a few yards from Diamond and stared at him, then with a wild whinny she broke and fled. Her alarmed cry got a quick response from Diamond, who answered her loudly.

Golden Boy sounded the alarm and wheeled to swing around his herd and get them headed upcountry. His movements were smooth and effortless as he darted

back and forth nipping the mares, shouldering them to make them run faster, forcing them into a tight formation with the colts pushed inside the group.

Charlie rode into the open and sat watching. He had bungled this time but he wouldn't do it again. He checked the herd carefully before they vanished into the timber. Three colts had survived the winter along with twelve mares. There were two new colts and a filly. At least one mare would be foaling soon.

Charlie followed the herd up the creek. He wondered what escape strategy the young leader was using. Big Red would have had them on a mesa where he could shove them into an arroyo or a canyon. Golden Boy seemed to have worked out another plan. He was driving the mares up the creek.

After trailing them a mile or more, Charlie came to the gateway leading into the box canyon. As he sat looking at it he suddenly remembered the canyon. He frowned. Golden Boy wasn't nearly as smart as Big Red. He had driven the band into a box canyon when he should have kept them in the open. Then Charlie's frown changed to a wide smile. The young leader's action just went to prove that Golden Boy was not truly a wild horse, not by instinct anyway.

He was still smiling and there was a thoughtful look on his face when he got back to the pack horse. If he could talk his father into making a drive they could catch the stallion and his herd. It would take only a few days if the whole Bar L crew worked at it. There was the argument that five of the mares were stolen animals and should be returned to their owners, but the main argument was Golden Boy. If only he could get

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his father to come up and look at the horse. He nodded his head as he jerked loose the lead rope from the tree where he had hitched the pack horse.

He knew there was no time to lose. Golden Boy might discover any day that the hidden valley was actually a trap. If he moved the herd into open country, the time required for a roundup would be more than Grandby could spare from the ranch work.

Charlie decided not to make camp but to return to the ranch that night. He was busy with his thoughts as they rode along. Suddenly Diamond shied and snorted. Charlie glanced to the right and saw a scattered collection of bones. A horse skull lay near a pile of rib bones. Charlie pulled Diamond up, but he was slow in moving him closer to the bones. The elation had suddenly died in him. If this was all that was left of Trey Spot he had to know. He turned Diamond and moved closer.

The bones had been worried until all of the meat was stripped from them, but they were clearly from a winter kill. Charlie's eyes rested on the big skull. A patch of skin clung to the bone between the eyeholes. The patch showed the corner of a white diamond. Charlie sat for a time staring at all that remained of Big Red, remembering vividly the last time he had seen the veteran, teeth bared, hoofs lashing out. He gently turned Diamond and rode away. He should have been happy because he was now even with the renegade who had smashed his hip, but he felt only an unexplainable sadness.

By pushing the horses hard he reached the ranch before his parents had gone to bed. They were surprised to see him, but not too surprised to notice that in

his excitement he set his cane beside the door and hobbled across the room to the open fire without it.

"I saw Golden Boy," he said, then he hesitated and looked at his father. "I want you to see him, Dad." His face wore a small-boy expression, and he hadn't called his father "Dad" for over a year.

His father smiled. "You want to tempt me into a wild-horse drive."

"I want to show you how easy it will be to take him," Charlie said eagerly. "You'll know why I have to have him when you see him."

Grandby Carter looked at his wife. She laid a hand on his knee and moved closer to him. "Could I go along?" she asked.

"Sure thing," Charlie replied quickly.

"Now wait a minute," Carter complained. "You two are ganging up on me." Then he looked at his wife again and the smile faded from his face. "Your mother's heart," he said, then stopped suddenly.

Charlie looked at his mother and his eagerness died. "I didn't know. You never told me."

"We should have," Grandby Carter said. "She has to be very careful."

"Dr. Crittenden says I can ride some this summer," his mother said. "I have to be careful, that's all."

Grandby Carter knew he'd have to look at the horse, and he knew Ann would have to go along, but he thought he'd be able to show Charlie what a job it would be to trap a wild herd.

"We'll go tomorrow and we'll start early," Ann Carter suggested.

Grandby laughed. He liked the idea of a day in the

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high country with Ann and his son. She had not ridden with him for a long time. If the doctor said it was all right, he wouldn't have to worry. He patted her hand.

"If that's going to be the program we better all get to bed," he said.

Charlie saw to it that they got an early start in the morning. His mother rode Diamond while Charlie rode Blackie. They did not have to trail a pack horse so they made good time. They had packed a lunch and a coffee-pot.

After they reached the breaks Charlie led the way, even though Grandby Carter knew Canna Creek very well. This time Charlie did not drop down and follow the stream, but kept well up on a bench. They sighted the herd in a small park and took a stand where they could watch. His mother became excited the instant she saw Golden Boy. His father sat watching the stallion, hardly believing his eyes. After a time he turned to Charlie.

"You are right about him, son. He belongs on a ranch. He'd be entitled to plenty of papers if his line could be traced." Then he added by way of making it easier for Charlie when he refused to organize a drive, "But it would take half of the summer to catch him in this open country."

"I'll show you how we'll take him," Charlie said.

He led them to the gateway a mile above the spot where the herd was feeding. As they sat looking at the rock gateway, Charlie explained.

"When I jumped them he drove the herd into the box canyon. Once in there they have to come out this way. I've been all through that canyon."

"I know the canyon," his father said. He was studying the tracks and trails made by the herd in coming and going through the gateway.

"It would be easy," Charlie urged.

"It would," his father agreed.

"You're going to try it?" Ann Carter asked eagerly.

Grandby nodded. "A heavy fence across the creek from wall to wall with a gate in it. Another fence down this way and you have a corral. We will keep them bottled in the canyon until the fence is up." He smiled with satisfaction as his eyes moved over the groves of aspens near by which cut easily and made the best corral poles.

"He's my horse," Charlie said.

"He'll be your horse," his father promised. "But Shorty will have to gentle him and pass on him before anyone rides him."

"He'll be gentle." Charlie was positive.

"He's a stallion and he was born wild. He's had the advantage of Big Red's training, so he may be tough," Carter warned, then added, "But I think he'll make a better than average stallion to handle."

"I wonder what happened to Big Red?" Ann asked.

"A fight, I'd say," Grandby replied. "Golden Boy drove him off."

Charlie did not say anything at all, and when they left the gateway he steered a course which would not take them past the heap of bones he had found. They avoided Canna Creek and halted for lunch at a spring on the Bar L land. Ann Carter wanted coffee—she did not think a picnic dinner was complete without camp-fire coffee—and they spent so much time around the fire that they were late in starting home.

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It was eleven o'clock when they rode in. Tex and Shorty had waited up when they failed to get home for supper. They stumbled sleepily out of the bunkhouse and offered to care for the horses. Carter spoke impatiently to them.

"No need to wait up for us, boys."

"Jest curious," Shorty said with a sleepy grin. "When do we start the wild-horse drive?"

Carter laughed. "Tomorrow."

After they had eaten a cold snack Charlie went up to bed, but he did not go to sleep at once. He sat down and wrote Ellen a letter telling her all about their plans. He ended it by promising to have Golden Boy so gentle she could ride him if she came West that summer.





17. Canyon Trap

AN HOUR before dawn Charlie and Shorty had left for the breaks. Ann and Grandby left at six o'clock. Tex and the two hands, Mack and Ernie, loaded a trail wagon with supplies and were on their way an hour later.

Charlie and Shorty located Golden Boy and his herd on Canna Creek. Charlie had worried all the way up the mountain for fear they wouldn't be there, but there they were where he had hoped to find them, less than a mile below the box canyon.

As they sat on a bushy knoll looking down into the valley, Shorty grinned. His eyes had not left the golden stallion. He had been breaking horses since he was sixteen, a full twenty-seven years. Before coming to the Bar L he had done other work, too. He considered himself retired so far as wild horses went, but as he watched

Golden Boy he knew he was going to gentle at least one more wild one before he was through.

"High-strung type," he commented. "We'll gentle him without breaking his spirit. A hoss like that can't be beat into doing anything."

Charlie nodded. He had been dreaming of handling the stallion himself. He was aware it was just a dream because his father would insist that Shorty take charge, and Shorty was the man to do it. Still, a feeling of jealousy stirred in him. He didn't want anybody but himself to train Golden Boy.

"He'll take to a saddle," he said.

Shorty nodded. "But like they say about rabbit stew, you have catch the rabbit first."

They separated and rode down to approach the herd from two different angles. It was a precaution to make sure Golden Boy drove the herd into the canyon. Charlie had the shortest distance to go. He got set in a grove and waited for Shorty's warning whistle.

When he heard the signal he headed Blackie out into the open. Shorty was coming out of the woods on his right. Instantly Golden Boy screamed and started rounding up the mares and pushing them up the creek. Charlie and Shorty pounded after them but did not make too much fuss. After the first rush they pulled up and waited. It was just as well to let the stallion think he had given them the slip.

"He ain't acting much like Big Red," Shorty said.

"He isn't Big Red," Charlie agreed.

"We haven't seen what he can do when he's cornered," Shorty warned.

"He'll fight. I had a taste of what he'll do," Charlie said.

They jogged along toward the gateway, taking it easy but keeping an eye open for any sudden break the herd might make.

Golden Boy shoved the herd up through the gateway and on to the upper end of the canyon. He stood for a full half hour just above the beaver lake watching the gateway. When no riders appeared he galloped away to join the mares. He could not understand why some of them acted restless and uneasy in the hide-out. There were good grass and water, but they always tried to leave as soon as they were within the shadow of the walls.

Charlie and Shorty reached the gateway and took up positions just inside the entrance. There was nothing to do but wait and be on the alert in case Golden Boy got nervous and tried to stampede the herd out of the canyon. They knew they would have a long wait before the trail wagon arrived, but Ann Carter and Grandby should get there before long.

But they did not arrive for two hours, having taken their time. Grandby had made sure Ann did not overtax herself. They had lunch inside the gateway and four hours later the trail wagon appeared. Tex had shoved the big geldings hard. Ann and Grandby set about making camp while the boys attacked the nearest grove of aspens with axes.

Up in the canyon Golden Boy cocked his head and listened. He could hear the sound of the axes. He galloped back and forth, his eyes on the slot below the beaver lake. After a bit he raced down the meadow and galloped across above the beaver dam. He saw Tex and Shorty setting a heavy post into a hole. With a

shrill scream he turned and raced back up the meadow.

He was uneasy and would have stampeded the mares out of the canyon if there had been another exit. He whinnied and danced about and finally set off to look for a route of escape. By the time darkness settled he had made a complete circle of the canyon and had found one trail that angled upward steeply along a very narrow and dangerous ledge. In the old days it had been used by mountain sheep, but no hoof had been set on it for years; even the mule deer avoided it. But if the mares could be forced up that trail it would lead them out of the valley.

Down at the gateway the men had thrown a fence across the opening. They lashed the last pole into place after darkness had settled. They were sure Golden Boy would try to slip his herd out during the night. There would be part of a moon to light the meadows. The gate could be made in the morning and the second fence added for the corral. All that was needed to keep the herd in the canyon had been done.

A campfire was roaring and supper was ready when they came in from their work. After they had eaten they sat around the dying fire talking, but by ten o'clock the camp was silent and the fire dead. Everyone except Charlie and his mother was asleep. Ann Carter was too excited to sleep at once, while Charlie lay awake listening, waiting for Golden Boy to come down and discover the fence.

Golden Boy did not sleep. He had moved down to the edge of the beaver lake and had smelled the campfire and heard the voices of the men. He was determined to get his herd out of the valley, but the ledge trail did

not seem to be the way. The best way seemed to be to stampede them out through the gateway, past the camp.

He rounded up his mares and started them down the long meadow. As usual the bay mare was in the lead. She had never trusted the canyon. Its high walls made her uneasy, and she was always the first one out when he allowed them to leave. As they neared the beaver lake Golden Boy drove them to a wild gallop.

The bay was the first horse to reach the pole fence. She halted a yard from it and snorted loudly. The others crowded against her, shoving her forward. She turned and fought her way back through the mares. Golden Boy met her with bared teeth. His angry scream wakened everyone in camp. He drove her back into the herd, but the mares would not move. They stood huddled against the fence, not knowing what to do. It took Golden Boy a minute to see the fence and to understand that escape was cut off. When he did understand he unleashed his fury on the mares, sending them back into the canyon in a wild stampede.

The herd milled around for several hours before they settled down in a tight bunch to stare down the slope. Golden Boy was filled with restless fury. He galloped about and finally drove them to the ledge trail and tried to force them to climb up along the face of the cliff. But even before his lashing hoofs and slashing teeth they backed away from the perilous climb. Trembling with anger he drove them back across the canyon, where he left them huddled inside a spruce grove while he raced down the meadow again. It was a bad night for the golden stallion, and he got no rest at all, though he did join the mares in deep cover toward dawn.

The men at the camp were up before daylight and had finished breakfast by the time gray dawn began to light the walls of the canyon. They were at work before the sun rose, eager to get the stockade finished. The distance to be fenced was not great and the aspen poles cut easily, but the hardest part was the setting of the heavy posts, which had to be well braced.

An hour before sunset that evening they were able to inspect the finished job. A wide gate had been fixed at the upper side which could be swung shut with a saddle rope. The lower gate was much smaller and the lower wall had been hidden by branches and limbs trimmed from the felled trees. Charlie had scouted the canyon and reported that the herd had quieted down.

As they sat around the campfire that night Grandby Carter explained the plan of attack to be used in the morning. Shorty would be gateman; Ann would be lookout and would be stationed on the first ledge, where she could signal to Shorty. The rest of the party would ride up into the valley while it was still dark. They would get above the herd and be ready for a drive at daylight. The herd would have to be kept moving, once it was stampeded.

"It's the stallion we want," he said as he finished explaining. "We'll ride him hard so he'll stay close to the mares. If he breaks back and tries to crash the line, you can try roping him if you feel lucky." He looked at Charlie. "You better leave your rope in camp, son."

"Shorty's using it on the gate," Charlie said.

When everyone knew what was to be done, the men unrolled their beds back of the freight wagon and turned in. Charlie felt sleepy as he rolled up beside

Shorty. Grandby and Ann sat for a while near the fire. They sat very close together with Ann's head resting against Grandby's shoulder.

"I hope we catch him," Ann said. "It will make up for the loss of Trey Spot."

"He won't get away," Grandby assured her.

"He may injure himself."

"Yes."

Grandby knocked out his pipe. This was like old times when they were fighting to get a start on the ranch. His arm tightened around Ann. The thought had hit him that her heart trouble might have been caused by those strenuous rides and long hours in the saddle helping him during the lean years.

Their voices sounded faintly in Charlie's ears as he drifted off to sleep. He was too sleepy to stay awake, even though he thought Golden Boy might try the fence again that night.

An hour before dawn the next morning the Bar L crew set about putting their plans into action. Grandby Carter made one last-minute change. He decided to take up a position at the edge of the beaver cut above the lake. When the herd passed him he would ride out and be close upon their heels as they entered the corral. He was afraid the herd might outrun the boys and give Golden Boy a chance to turn back before he passed through the gate. If Golden Boy turned back and broke through it might take weeks to catch him, even though he could not escape from the valley. Once he had figured out for himself that the corral was a trap he would not enter it.

Charlie had borrowed Diamond from his mother for

the ride. He and Tex took the right-hand wall, Mack and Ernie the left side. They separated just above the beaver lake and moved carefully upward. They hoped to be lucky enough to find the herd in the middle of the meadow where the stream ran. That way they could slip past them.

Charlie and Tex moved along for half an hour without seeing or hearing anything. There was no moon and the stars gave only a pale light which deepened into blackness along the canyon walls. All they could see was the trees near them and the gray rock walls they were hugging. Charlie began to have an uneasy feeling that the herd wasn't in the valley. He had been sure they would hear Golden Boy as he patrolled his harem. He had depended on that to let them know where the herd was. The feeling grew stronger as they neared the upper end of the canyon and heard the roar of the stream as it tumbled down through the crevice. Perhaps there was some trail he did not know about, after all.

They halted where the stream flattened into a wide riffle after bursting from the canyon wall. They could hear the roar of the falls where the water poured over a cliff a few rods farther up in the crevice. It seemed impossible that Golden Boy could have followed the stream out. Charlie peered across the narrow creek. Ernie and Mack should be on the other side, if they had arrived. After a while he made out the dark forms of the two riders.

The grayness began to fade. Overhead the stars were fading in a great arch of silver light.

"Seems almighty still," Tex muttered.

"Yes," Charlie agreed.

They lapsed into silence and sat peering down into the meadow. The light came slowly. They began to make out trees and shrubs down the valley. Charlie bent forward, trying to make out shapes and forms he thought he saw.

The two riders across the creek were clearly visible now. They, too, were peering down the meadow. A match flared as one of them lighted a cigarette. Tex grunted angrily. There had been an order against smoking but Mack had forgotten.

Charlie had fixed his eyes on a dark shape close to a pine tree. The form moved, then another appeared, and a third.

"There they are," he whispered.

Tex was leaning forward. He nodded his head. "No sign of the stallion," he muttered.

Charlie knew Golden Boy would be difficult to spot in the gray light, but now he was sure the stallion was down there. He would not leave the mares. Sure enough, a few minutes later they saw him. He moved nervously out of the timber and stood looking up and down the valley. Through the night he had held the mares in a tight bunch inside a grove.

Time dragged as they waited for more light. It came slowly but when it reached a certain point the air seemed to glow and daylight was upon them. A shaft of sunlight had hit a cloud high above and the red fire was reflected into the valley.

"Guess this is it," Tex said. He raised a hand in a signal to Mack and Ernie, who signaled back.

A few seconds later the four riders were galloping down the meadow. They fanned out and sent their

horses down through the willow and alder clumps and as they urged them on they shook out their ropes. Charlie was on the outside because Diamond was the fastest of the four horses. Charlie was glad the herd was on his side of the creek.

Golden Boy saw the riders coming. He stood for an instant considering how they could have appeared from that quarter, then he whirled and rushed at the mares, crying loudly. The mares wheeled and stampeded down the meadow. Shouting and swinging their ropes the men charged after them. The cold morning air was filled with their shouts and with the ring of pounding hoofs. The herd had a good lead and Charlie saw that even Diamond wasn't going to be able to overtake them. He was glad his father was waiting below to close in on their heels.

Golden Boy made a real show out of the stampede. He leaped from mare to mare, snapping savagely at their flanks and rumps. He was remembering how he had not been able to make Trey Spot run fast enough to get away from the Navahos.

The herd thundered around the head of the beaver lake and rushed into the gateway. Golden Boy was close behind them, urging them on. Charlie broke around the lake in time to see his father hazing the band through the gate with Golden Boy wildly hurling himself against their flanks.

The lead mares hit the lower fence and were hurled back. One of them went down and a colt staggered out of the mass badly shaken. Golden Boy plunged through the milling bunch and came up against the fence. He whirled and knocked a mare to her knees as he lunged

back toward the gate. Charlie caught his breath. He wondered why Shorty didn't close the gate. The trip rope must have failed to work. Then he saw Shorty. He was pushing the gate shut, heaving at it as he tried to close it. It seemed as though he surely must collide with Golden Boy and be smashed by the stallion's hoofs. Grandby Carter spurred his horse forward and sent him against the gate. It went shut and Shorty fell flat on his face. Charlie saw the log bar drop into place and drew a deep breath of relief.

Golden Boy hit the gate a second after it had locked. His forefeet hit the top pole and for a moment Charlie thought he was going to clear the barrier. But it was too high by at least a foot. He fell back and whirled to charge the lower barrier.

Carter had dismounted and Shorty was on his feet. He had recovered his hat and was dusting himself off. Carter gave him one quick glance, then ran to help his wife down off the ledge. Charlie joined them at the gate.

"He'll hurt himself!" Ann Carter cried nervously as she watched Golden Boy lunge about inside the corral.

"He's about through with the wild stuff," her husband said.

The mares had given up and stood huddled together. Golden Boy dashed back and forth with undiminished fury, but he had stopped leaping at the fence, trying to clear it. Mack grinned down at Shorty, who was making himself a smoke.

"You can have all of that fellow," Mack said.

Shorty squinted at the crimped end of his cigarette. "He shore is full of soup," he said, then he grinned and

added, "And his feet look mighty big from close up." Not so many minutes ago he had been expecting those hoofs to smash him.

Nervously Charlie waited for Golden Boy to give up. Finally the stallion halted and stood staring at the men outside the fence. His nostrils flared and his eyes rolled. Shorty called out to him.

"Keep your shirt on, Golden Boy."

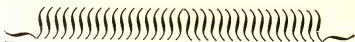
The stallion snorted and shook his head. He was waiting for the next move.

"He's yours from now on, Shorty," Grandby said. "The rest of us will have to get back to work."

Shorty studied the stallion through half-closed eyes. "We'll just let him simmer a while. I could go for some breakfast."

They all pitched in and helped get a breakfast of bacon and eggs and flapjacks and black coffee. As they ate, Charlie sat beside Shorty watching Golden Boy. He planned to camp with Shorty until they were able to bring the stallion to the ranch. Shorty knew the boy would be at his elbow all the time but he did not mind.





18. *Easy Does It*

SHORTY AND CHARLIE moved their camp to a spot close to the corral at the mouth of the canyon. The branded mares had been cut out and sent down country with Mack and Ernie. They would be held in the horse pasture until their owners could be notified. All of the wild mares except the bay were turned loose. Grandby Carter could not bring himself to the point where he would sell horseflesh to a slaughterhouse. Shorty had noticed that the bay mare favored Golden Boy and he kept her so the stallion would not be too restless.

They sat on a log watching Golden Boy. Charlie knew very well how Shorty worked, but he was hoping this time it would be different. Shorty pushed back his hat.

"We got two weeks to take the kinks out of him," he said.

200 THE CAPTURE OF THE GOLDEN STALLION

"When he starts eating grain and finds the feed comes from us we'll have half the battle won," Charlie remarked.

Shorty shook his head. "You kin make friends but it would take months, and then at bottom he'd still be uncertain and might come undone when you least expected it."

Charlie stared at the palomino horse. Even if it took a year he'd like to try winning the affection of this stallion.

"I used to top off six to eight a day," Shorty said. "Less if they was fine-bred like him and had been running loose all their lives. Figure it'll take a full two weeks and some hard work on him."

Charlie got to his feet. "May as well get at it," he said.

They saddled up and entered the corral through the lower gate. Golden Boy watched every move they made, his eyes rolling wildly. Shorty had a snubbing rope and Charlie had a foot rope. When Shorty rode toward Golden Boy he shook out his rope. Golden Boy reared up and Shorty flipped his loop neatly over the forefeet, jerking up fast and taking a hitch, a turn and a half around the saddle horn just to make sure.

Golden Boy plunged and went down. Instantly Charlie was off, his lameness completely forgotten. He leaped forward and tied the front feet securely. Shorty was at his side at once and together they slipped a heavy halter over the stallion's head. Charlie stepped back and Shorty jerked the tie rope and the loop loose. Golden Boy plunged to his feet and leaped back, then whirled around the corral, splashing through the stream as the dragrope coiled and leaped behind him.

Shorty stood watching him for a little while, then he rolled a cigarette and lighted it. No use in hurrying things. The stallion had to cool down so he'd know what was happening to him.

"May as well set a snubbing post," Charlie said. He was impatient to get on with the breaking.

"Sure," Shorty replied. "And we better set her deep."

They spent the next two hours setting a heavy post into the ground and tamping it solidly. Shorty refused to be hurried. He had broken many a tough bronco and the only ones he had ruined were the ones he tried to hurry.

"You don't want him to end up gelded and bucking in a Wild West show, do you?" he asked when Charlie voiced his impatience.

"No," Charlie agreed grudgingly.

Shorty tossed aside his cigarette and flipped his shovel over the fence. He turned to his horse and mounted. Charlie got into his saddle and waited tensely as Shorty eased in close to Golden Boy, who had stopped fighting the dragrope. The puncher swung down and very carefully got hold of the end of the dragrope. He raised it very carefully, then took a couple of hitches around his saddle horn. His horse got set for what he knew was coming.

Golden Boy felt the rope jerk and leaped. He felt the rope tighten and the halter begin to pinch. Setting his weight against it he dragged Shorty's horse forward. The horse held back stubbornly, but Golden Boy soon had him moving at top speed. He shot past the snubbing post but Shorty's horse did not pass it on the same side. He went around the post like a scared rabbit, snub-

bing Golden Boy up close so he could not get his head up high or all the way down to the ground.

Golden Boy fought the rope savagely, but he couldn't get his feet over it and he couldn't move the post. Shorty made the hitch tight and sauntered over to gather up the reins of his horse.

"That's it until evening," he said.

Charlie looked at Golden Boy. He wanted to walk up and talk to him, to try to calm him, but he knew he could do nothing at all now that Shorty had matters in hand. The stallion was in a fury of excited rage.

Toward evening they loosened the dragrope from around the post. Golden Boy had fought himself out, but he was still cagey and ready to renew the battle. He leaped away with the dragrope snaking behind him.

The bay mare watched and kept out of the way. Charlie and Shorty cared for their horses and then fixed a hot supper over the campfire. They didn't sit up late that night but rolled in as soon as darkness settled.

Charlie was eager for the next day's work, which would be saddling and riding. He was a bit nervous about it, even though he knew Shorty was an artist at riding a bucking horse.

"Think you can snub him?" Shorty asked as they approached the corral.

"Yes," Charlie answered.

"And mebbby dab a front-foot catch?" Shorty grinned.

"I can try," Charlie said.

Shorty dragged his saddle into the corral and dropped it near the snubbing post. Charlie rode Diamond in and started working Golden Boy for a chance to get hold of the dragrope. After two tries he got it

and sent the stallion across the corral. He made a neat snub and Shorty nodded his approval. Golden Boy fought the post for some minutes while Shorty just stood and looked at him before he bent over his saddle and got a pair of hobbles and a hackamore he had tied there.

Charlie waited for the word from Shorty before trying a front-foot catch on Golden Boy. When Shorty nodded he eased in and swung his loop as Golden Boy reared back. He made his catch a bit low but the rope held and Golden Boy's forefeet were pulled together. The stallion lunged and fought and finally threw himself, going down with a hard thud. Charlie kept his feet out from under him by jerking on the rope when he struggled to get up. After a while Golden Boy just lay and snorted and rolled his eyes. Shorty moved in and fastened the hobbles, then he fastened a length of rope to the halter and brought it down over the chest and around one hind leg, with the rope drawn tight enough so that Golden Boy could reach the ground with the foot but had no slack for kicking.

Charlie coiled his rope and Shorty backed away. Golden Boy got to his feet and at once started fighting. Shorty walked away and leaned against the corral gate. The stallion had to learn there was no use fighting against those hobbles or against the leg rope. It would take a little time, but there was no hurry. At the moment Golden Boy was in a fury and wasn't using his head. After a while he'd start to figure out a few things.

The stallion fought for a half hour until he was in a lather and trembling all over. At last he quit and stood balancing himself in a three-legged stance. Shorty let

him cool off. Charlie's face showed his impatience, but he didn't say anything. Later on he'd make it all up with Golden Boy.

After a while Shorty stripped off his jumper and walked over to the palomino. He caught hold of the dragrope and pulled the stallion's head around, then he eased forward. Golden Boy tried to smash him with his hobbled feet. He fought and jerked and snorted but this time did not throw himself. He had learned to balance on three legs by now. It took Shorty quite a while to work along the rope until he was able to touch the stallion's nose. There was more fighting then but Shorty got his hand up to the ears and then onto a shoulder. The instant Shorty's hand touched Golden Boy's shoulder he plunged and fought savagely, screaming and baring his teeth. In his fury he finally threw himself. Shorty stepped back, but when Golden Boy got to his feet again, he eased in and started all over. This time he made use of his jumper. He slapped and fanned the stallion's face with it. It was a terrifying thing to Golden Boy and he went wild again, plunging and fighting the halter. But the wildest scene came when Shorty flipped the jumper across the stallion's withers. Golden Boy's cries could be heard far up the mountain and for a moment he almost seemed to explode. He ended up on his side, lashing the air with his hoofs.

When he got to his feet once more, Shorty had retrieved the jumper. He went at it again, patiently, and kept at it for more than twenty minutes. In the end Golden Boy had to give in and let Shorty rub him. Golden Boy grunted as he realized that it was good

to feel the jumper scrubbing across his sweaty back.

Shorty kept the jumper moving as he eased the saddle across the horse's back. He didn't use a blanket and he made an extra wild flourish with the jumper as he jerked the cinch tight and stepped back, a grin on his face. So far so good. Charlie had moved in close because now Shorty would slip off the heavy halter and replace it with the hackamore. Golden Boy permitted the change without moving. He was tired and had begun to see the uselessness of fighting heavy ropes. But when Shorty gave the hackamore rope a jerk and Golden Boy found his head free he started bucking. He couldn't do much of a job of pitching with his front feet hobbled tightly together and his hind leg useless, but he tried, and Shorty let him go on until he stopped of his own accord. Then he walked up and shook the jumper in the stallion's face. Golden Boy snorted and shook his head. Shorty caught hold of the hackamore rope and jerked. Golden Boy made a few jumps and stopped.

Shorty eased in alongside the horse and lifted a toe to the stirrup. He didn't plan to mount at once because Golden Boy might throw himself and that would be dangerous for Shorty. But he eased his weight on the saddle a couple of times. Charlie moved in and waited tense and alert.

Shorty started talking to Golden Boy. He reached down and loosened the leg rope, then he freed the hobbles. Golden Boy stood still, not knowing his feet were free. Shorty eased into the saddle smoothly and swiftly, then set himself. When he jerked the hackamore rope, Golden Boy discovered that his feet were

free. He ducked his head and shook it once before he realized there was a man on his back. An instant later he was off, plunging across the corral, sending up a shower of water from the creek.

When he hit the far bank he came undone and started as pretty a bucking show as Charlie had ever seen. Shorty rode easily but with none of the grace of a show rider. His main idea was to stay on top. Golden Boy went high and came down stiff-legged, he went up again and twisted in a sunfish turn which pulled Shorty's head around. He fought back across the stream but he couldn't get the rider off. Finally he began to realize that Shorty could not be moved, any more than the post and the dragrope. He gave a few stiff-legged jumps and stopped. Charlie wanted to shout but he was afraid he'd send the stallion into another fit of bucking, and Shorty's face looked very white.

Shorty fooled around with Golden Boy a while longer, then eased off and loosened the saddle. When he stripped it off, the stallion backed away, then whirled and leaped across the corral. Shorty grinned at Charlie.

"Nice going," Charlie said.

"Yeah," Shorty agreed. "But I wouldn't want to top more'n two a day like him. He shore shook me up."

"You think it will take two weeks?" Charlie asked.

"Close to it," Shorty replied.

After that second day they worked Golden Boy through much the same routine for several days. Shorty had him figured out as a nervous horse but one that really didn't have a mean streak in him. As he stood looking into the corral on the fourth day, he said:



As pretty a bucking show as Charlie had ever seen

"Now if I was fighting Big Red instead of the palomino he'd buck harder and be meaner than ever today. You called it when you said this feller wasn't a real wild horse."

"I think I could ride Golden Boy today," Charlie said. The stallion had moved a step toward them and was watching.

Shorty shook his head. "No use you getting shook up."

Charlie understood that Shorty did not want him to risk injuring his bad hip and was not implying that the boy couldn't stay on Golden Boy.

That day Shorty had very little trouble with Golden Boy, so far as bucking went. The stallion had begun to figure out a few things for himself. He couldn't get Shorty off and he wasn't being abused or hurt. That morning the snubbing post wasn't used. When he was roped Golden Boy halted and stood still. He humped and did a few hard jumps but he didn't pitch when Shorty hit the saddle.

By the end of the week Charlie was ready to take over and teach the stallion a few turns and some stopping and starting. It was far from what he longed to do, but he knew that he had to take it easy, so he did not ride out of the corral.

Shorty rode the stallion out of the corral for the first time since he was captured. Golden Boy made a short run but didn't buck, and he did not fight when he was headed back. He stood still when Charlie approached him with a pan of oats. But he wouldn't let Charlie handle him when the bridle and saddle were off. Charlie just grinned and set the oats down.

"Better make up your mind," he said. "One of these days you and I are going out riding."

On the thirteenth day Shorty was satisfied with the job he had done. "He's safe enough now for even a woman," he announced. "What say we head back to the Bar L?"

Charlie was delighted. This was what he had been waiting for. They packed up and tied Golden Boy to the mare, knowing she would not run far if they did break away. Golden Boy was excited but he gave them very little trouble.

A few hours later everyone turned out to watch them put Golden Boy into the ranch breaking pen. When Ann Carter approached him he cocked his ears forward and looked at her.

"Careful," her husband warned.

She laughed. "He's as gentle as a kitten," she said, and walked up to the stallion.

Grandby Carter watched tensely and Charlie moved closer to Golden Boy's head. Ann Carter held out her hand with a cut apple in it. Golden Boy thrust forward his muzzle and sniffed loudly, then he bit a piece off the apple. Grandby smiled broadly and shrugged his shoulders as she brushed the blond mane out of Golden Boy's eyes. He took the rest of the apple and started eating it.

Charlie felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched his mother. Golden Boy had accepted her at once and he was showing more affection for her than he had shown for anyone else. The stallion lowered his head and let her rub his neck.

Carter was thinking about how his wife had insisted

that Big Red had swerved aside because he did not want to harm her. Now he was convinced she did have some unusual power over horses.

Charlie swallowed the little stab of jealousy and helped Shorty put Golden Boy into the breaking pen. The stallion marched around the pen sniffing and snorting. He had never in his life come in contact with so many man smells.

Charlie's head was full of plans for the stallion but he did not talk about them. He was planning on riding Golden Boy as a saddle horse. If he could get him broken well enough to handle safely, he meant to enter him in the big race at the rodeo. But he was still so badly handicapped by his leg that he kept all such plans to himself so that there would be no interference.

He went at the training of Golden Boy exactly the way Shorty had suggested. Grandby Carter was glad Charlie had something to keep him interested and busy. He did not want him out working cattle where there was a chance that he'd try to throw a steer or do some other dangerous thing. He figured that Charlie would not try anything foolish, like riding the stallion, for some time.

Charlie spent almost all of his time down at the breaking pen. He saddled Golden Boy every day and got on and off. Slowly and patiently he taught him to understand a neck rein, to stand ground-hitched, and to obey a curb when he applied it.

He was so sure of himself when he decided to take his first ride that he did not worry at all. He picked a day when his parents were in town and the men were out working cattle. He was sure he had taught Golden Boy

to understand his clumsy way of mounting. He had done it a hundred times in the pen.

It was Charlie's opinion, due partly to his intense liking for the horse, that Golden Boy was more reliable than some of the horses the Bar L boys rode. Still he was a stallion, and bound to be interested in the ranch mares. He kept up a vocal battle with Kelly, who was kept in a large corral near the barn, and he would have chased every gelding off the place if given a chance. With all of this in mind Charlie was using a special bit which could punish the stallion painfully if he started to get out of hand.

That day Charlie opened the pen gate and mounted Golden Boy. The stallion trotted out through the gate and shook his head as he looked down over the grassy meadow toward the river. Charlie headed him toward the high country. Golden Boy danced sidewise and then shook himself. Charlie leaned forward and let him have his head. Suddenly the big horse broke into a gallop. His movement was smooth and easy. It was like riding in a hammock on a windy day.

Realizing that he was free to run, Golden Boy laid back his ears and raced across the grassland. Charlie wasn't sure he wasn't running away, but he did not use the hard bit, he just let the stallion go. They crossed Roaring River and headed up the slope. Bending low, Charlie listened to the lung action and a grin broke over his face. Golden Boy would take a mile and a half and come in breathing easy.

By the time they reached the first stands of timber Golden Boy was beginning to feel the steep climb. He slowed his pace and without being touched whirled out

on a knoll and stood looking back as though expecting to see horsemen in pursuit. He sent a high call ringing down over the valley. Charlie slapped his neck hard.

"Just the way I thought it would be," he said.

Golden Boy shook his head, then he turned and raced toward a stand of aspens. Charlie knew the test was at hand. He had no intention of riding through a close stand of aspens at a mad gallop. He gave Golden Boy a knee and the neck rein. Golden Boy did not change his course. It was plain to see that he was heading for cover. Charlie used the bit a little, then harder. He felt the stallion's back hump in quick anger. Setting himself, he bore down, keeping a short rein so the big boy could not get his head down. Golden Boy reared up and came down hard but he swerved, and he did not buck.

After that, Charlie worked at teaching him to obey. Golden Boy was impatient and temperamental, but he was also a smart horse and Shorty had done his work well. Also, the palomino had no bucking instinct.

Charlie gave the horse a hard workout to make sure he'd appreciate the corral when they got back to the ranch. He let Golden Boy have a glimpse of his former range but they did not get up into the breaks. Back at the corral Golden Boy was glad to get inside, and to shove his head into a measure of oats. Charlie rubbed him down until his coat shone. By this time Golden Boy had come to enjoy the currycomb and brush. It beat rolling in sand or grass to get the dust out of his coat.

Charlie was returning the currycomb and brush to the barn when he heard voices. Mack and Ernie were in a box stall working on the hoof of a saddle horse. Mack was probing for a stone in the front foot, Ernie

was bending over watching. Before Charlie could say anything, Ernie spoke and his words made Charlie stop in his tracks.

"Tough to be bunged up like Charlie. Tex says he'll always be crippled."

"Wonder what that swell girl friend will say when she sees him?" Mack remarked.

"Can't ever tell," Ernie said.

Charlie walked slowly to the barn door and slipped outside. He went to the saddle house and left the comb and brush there. He tried not to limp as he walked up to the house. He had never considered Ellen his girl friend. Nor had he ever thought about what she would think of his game leg. He had been looking forward to seeing her since she had written that her parents were letting her come West again for the summer. He had merely thought that they would take up their same care-free relationship where they had left off the previous fall.

As he climbed the steps to the house he began to wonder just what she would think of him now. The more he thought about it, the more he began to be afraid she might not feel the same toward him now that he had a crippled leg. Some girls might, but Ellen was an outdoors girl. She might feel sorry for him. He just couldn't stand that.

During the next few days he thought about it a lot, and he began to dread meeting her. When his mother brought the subject up he didn't have much to say.

"This summer you'll have to do more than just take Ellen riding," she said. "Girls like to dance and go to movies."

Charlie swallowed. He had never been any good on

a dance floor, and now with his game leg he knew he'd make a mess of it.

"She'll be here for the rodeo," she went on eagerly. "I had a letter from her today. I've asked her to be our guest again this summer." She looked at Charlie and shook her head. "She said she hadn't heard from you lately."

Charlie managed a half smile. His mother was so pleased with the things she was planning that she wasn't likely to notice anything, but he was careful.

"I've been pretty busy with Golden Boy," he said.

"So you have, dear." She went on rolling socks into balls for the bureau drawer. "We'll have to squeeze in a picnic or two this summer. Your father will just have to manage to take a little time away from his stock."

Charlie moved toward the door, bent on escaping. She tossed a pair of socks into the mending basket.

"You've written to her, of course? She'll expect a letter from you."

Charlie flushed in spite of himself. "I will," he said as he left the room.

He walked back to the barn and stopped at Golden Boy's corral. The stallion trotted over to the gate and Charlie gave him two lumps of sugar. He thrust his pink nose through the bars and Charlie rubbed it.

"I got a letter to write tonight," Charlie said. "Wish you could do it for me."

Golden Boy snorted and shook his head. Charlie squared his shoulders. "Might as well get it over with," he muttered as he turned back toward the house.

In his room, he wrote the letter. He told Ellen he had not completely recovered from the smashing he had

taken from Big Red. He thought that would give her a chance to think about it before they met. If the letter was brief and a trifle stiff, it merely reflected the pride of its author. He wasn't asking for sympathy. He addressed the envelope and put an air-mail stamp on it, then left it on his mother's stand where it would go out with the ranch mail the next day.





19. Rodeo Time

CHARLIE spent the last week before the rodeo in getting Golden Boy used to running against other horses. The ranch boys raced their horses against him. This time none of the boys seemed inclined to bet against the ranch entry. The only thing that could beat the stallion was his temperament and his inclination to fight with the geldings and chase the mares. Charlie worked him with other horses and patiently taught him how to behave himself. The big race was to be over a mile course and Golden Boy did the mile as easily as he did the quarter.

Mack and Ernie were taking alternate days at the show because one man had to stay at the ranch. But the rest of the Bar L folks would spend the full three days in town.

The rodeo at Cedar Bank was a typical cattleman's celebration. It was not a fair or an attraction to draw

people from outside the cow region; it was a get-together where ranchers met one another and had a chance to talk and have fun.

Charlie had always entered the calf roping and the junior riding events. This year he would enter only the big race. In the big race any horse owned by a rancher or cow hand could be entered. There were many fast horses in the valley and the race was always hotly contested.

Charlie was in town early the first morning of the show. He had rented a box stall in a barn near the grounds and put Golden Boy into it. The big stallion caused a lot of comment. Tex laughed as they stood outside the stall.

"He's a danged show-off," he said. "Notice the way he walks the dog when people are watching?"

Shorty had brought the widow, Mrs. Garrity, out to see Charlie's race horse. She stood well back from the stall and blinked at Golden Boy and she clung tightly to Shorty's arm.

"Did you break that beast?" she asked.

"Shore," Shorty answered. "Reckon I sort of took the first kinks out of him."

Mrs. Garrity frowned. "Don't you ever do a foolish thing like that again, do you hear?"

Shorty got red in the face and started to squirm. Tex and Charlie grinned broadly as the widow hurried Shorty out of the barn.

"Poor Shorty," Charlie said.

"He'll make out all right," Tex remarked. "Now that he knows what she aims to do to him, he'll take off like an antelope."

Charlie turned back to Golden Boy. The palomino had certainly put on a show for the crowd at the barn. Then he frowned as he suddenly remembered he was to go out to the Hansen place where he would be a guest along with his mother and father. He had not seen Ellen yet, but he would have to meet her when he went to the Hansens'.

He walked up the street trying not to limp. He was greeted by many people he knew. He imagined everyone was noticing his limp. He thought they probably talked about it the way Mack and Ernie had talked in the horse barn that day.

He wasted as much time as he could in getting to the Hansen home. When he arrived he found everyone out on the front lawn. He saw Ellen at once. She was talking to Dean Bailey. Dean's yellow convertible was parked in the street and Charlie had an idea he was there to take Ellen to the show. Harriet was standing beside Mrs. Carter with her back turned to the gate. He opened the gate and stood there for a moment.

Ellen had her face turned toward Dean, but Judge Hansen saw Charlie and called to him.

"Hello, Charlie, come on in."

Before he could move, Ellen turned around. She was laughing at something Dean had said to her. She was still laughing as she moved toward him. Charlie was really glad to see her and he forgot all about his game leg. He started forward to take her hand and the bad leg threw him off balance, as it always did when he didn't watch it. With an effort he recovered himself and took her hand, feeling a warm flush creeping up into his cheeks.

Ellen stopped laughing. "Charlie," she cried, then added quickly and softly, "You look wonderful."

Dean had sauntered over. He held out a hand. "How's the game leg, Charlie?" he asked.

"I manage," he replied, and looked Dean in the eye.

"Your mother says you're going to race Golden Boy," Ellen said quickly.

"I have him entered in the big race," Charlie said. He felt uncomfortable and clumsy before her.

"Take me to see him, please," Ellen urged. "I can't wait."

Harriet had joined them. She was a plump girl with very large gray eyes and a wide mouth.

"Yes, do take us to see him," she said, giggling.

"We'll drive down to the barn in Harriet's car," Ellen suggested.

"I'll drive you down," Dean said. "I want to see this wonder horse myself." He placed a hand under Ellen's elbow and guided her toward the gate. Charlie walked beside Harriet but he didn't hold her arm. He was watching his step and did not limp.

They got into the sleek canary-yellow car. Dean put Ellen in front with him, Charlie and Harriet sat in the back. Charlie watched Ellen as they swung away from the curb. Her hair blew back from her face as they drove up the street. She turned and smiled at Charlie.

"Your mother is letting me ride Diamond this summer," she said.

Charlie wanted to ask her how long she planned to stay at the ranch. There were many things he wanted to ask her, but Harriet laughed and pulled at his arm.

"Did you ever see such crowds?" she asked.

"No," Charlie answered.

"I won't be able to spend so much time at the ranch this summer," Ellen said. "Mother and Dad are coming out and they don't care for horses." She turned back quickly as Dean said something to her.

Charlie sat back and listened to Harriet without actually hearing what she said. She talked just as much as she always had—the Eastern girls' school hadn't changed that. She sat as close to him as she could, but he didn't move over, though he had room to ease away from her.

He felt more sure of himself when they stood before the box stall looking at Golden Boy. Ellen gave an eager squeal of delight. "He's beautiful!" she cried. Then she moved close to the gate. Golden Boy swung his head over. He was looking for sugar. His nostrils flared and he shook his blond mane.

"Don't go near that brute," Dean warned sharply. He caught her arm and tried to pull her back. Harriet stood staring at the beautiful horse, unable, for once, to say anything.

Ellen shook off Dean's hand impatiently. Charlie stepped up and gave Golden Boy the sugar he was looking for. Ellen ran her hand along the bridge of his nose.

"Ellen," Harriet said in a high voice, "get back. He might bite."

Charlie and Ellen laughed, but Dean backed off and stood beside Harriet. He showed his dislike for the horse in a dark frown.

"I'd like to ride him," Ellen said.

"When you come out to the ranch I'll let you ride him," Charlie promised.

"He'll win the race," Ellen said.

"If Charlie can stay on him with that game leg," Dean said.

Charlie hesitated just a second before he answered. "I'll stay on him," he replied quietly.

"Charlie can ride anything," Ellen's eyes were sparkling.

When they were outside, Dean turned to Charlie. "Where can we drop you off?" he asked.

Charlie looked at Ellen. If she had a date with Dean he didn't want to be in the way. She smiled at him. "Charlie is going back to the house with us," she said.

"You're riding in the parade with me," Dean reminded her.

"I'm riding Diamond." Charlie caught a note of sharpness in her voice.

"I promised the car dealer I'd drive the convertible in the parade," Dean said. "I didn't hire a horse."

"You can drive it, then." She turned to Charlie. "Are you going to ride Golden Boy?"

"Yes," Charlie answered. He looked at Dean and grinned as he added, "If I can stay on him."

"I'm riding on a float as a daughter of the pioneers," Harriet said. She looked quickly at Dean. "But I don't have to do it. They have five other girls."

"I'll ride with you, Charlie," Ellen said.

"Golden Boy will behave better if Diamond is with him," Charlie said. "He's used to Diamond."

They did not talk much on the way home, and Dean did not get out of the car. Harriet lingered at the curb,

but he drove off with a wave of his hand, and Harriet was left standing there.

The parade was mostly horses, with a few floats furnished by the businessmen. Everyone young and old who had a horse rode in the parade. Ann and Grandby Carter rode a pair of matched blacks from the ranch herd. Charlie planned to reach the parade grounds just a few minutes before the march started, so that Golden Boy would not get fussy. Ellen went with him to the barn, where he saddled Diamond for her.

But there was confusion and delay at the starting place and Golden Boy was stepping high by the time they were waved into line by an official.

Charlie worked Golden Boy into the line beside Diamond. He had been giving the stallion his full attention. Now he was able to look along the line of mounted men and women. Suddenly he leaned forward and then turned quickly to Ellen.

"Look," he said, pointing to a horse four places ahead of them.

Ellen looked and saw a black mare with a buckskin filly at her side. An Indian boy was riding the mare, bareback.

"An Indian!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"It's Trey Spot!" Charlie said, his voice almost a shout.

Ellen's eyes opened wide as she looked at the mare. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'd know her anywhere," Charlie replied. "After the parade we'll find her."

"But how could an Indian boy have her?" Ellen asked doubtfully.

"Golden Boy took her south into the desert. He came back without her. The Navahos probably caught her." Charlie was so excited he let Golden Boy swing out of line.

At that moment Bekis looked back. His eyes opened wide as he saw the golden stallion. He could not be mistaken about such a horse. Then he met Charlie's eyes. Charlie smiled and Bekis turned quickly around.

"I wonder if she's entered in the big race?" Charlie said. "But she must be. There wouldn't be any other reason for bringing her here."

The parade started to move and he was forced to give all of his attention to Golden Boy. He was tempted to whistle to Trey Spot, but he didn't do it. As he watched her prancing along with her head held high he felt very warm and happy inside. He could claim her and the filly. They were his. Then he got to thinking about the Indian boy. He could see that Trey Spot had been well cared for. That made him feel friendly toward the boy. He wondered what trick had been used to hide the Bar L brand.

The parade swung down the main street and headed back to the rodeo grounds. After the parade broke up Charlie and Ellen kept their eyes on Trey Spot. The boy left the parade at once and rode out of town. The Navaho camp was a half mile below town on a stream. When they rode into the camp, Bekis was picketing Trey Spot on a grassy knoll near a tent. He stood watching them as they rode up. He knew Charlie was the owner of the mare and that he had come to claim her. Bekis had been dreading this moment while knowing it might come.

Charlie pulled up and smiled down at Bekis. "Hello," he said, and his eyes moved to Trey Spot. He saw what had been done to alter the brand. It was a very crude job. The L had been made into a box, making the brand Bar Box.

"Hello," Bekis said in English.

"Fine mare you have there," Charlie remarked.

"Yes," Bekis said.

"Do you think she'll win the race?" Charlie grinned at Bekis.

"She has always won," Bekis answered. His dark eyes were on Charlie's face.

Golden Boy was fighting his bit and pricking his ears toward Trey Spot. Several men were riding toward the camp. Charlie waited while Willie Yellow Man rode up and dismounted. Willie had been expecting trouble ever since they started taking the mare around to races. Bekis spoke to his father in Navaho. Willie nodded his head.

"I lost a black mare a year ago." Charlie patted Golden Boy's neck. "This fellow stole her, but he did not bring her back when he returned to our range."

Bekis looked up at him, his black eyes unwinking.

"Mind if I take a closer look at your mare?"

Bekis shook his head sadly.

Charlie whistled sharply. It was a signal Trey Spot had obeyed since she was a filly. Her head jerked up and she whinnied eagerly as she pulled at her picket rope. Golden Boy fought his bit as he started to prance. Charlie had to bear down heavily on the harsh bit to curb him. He knew he had better be going before Golden Boy gave him trouble.

"Go ahead and race her. If she wins the purse is yours," he said to Bekis. "I'll see you after the race, but we won't have any trouble over her. I appreciate the care you have given her."

For the first time Bekis smiled. "She is a good horse," he said.

Willie Yellow Man said nothing. He understood what Charlie said because he spoke English as well as Bekis, but he knew there was nothing to say.

Charlie and Ellen galloped away. At the bar they unsaddled their horses and put Golden Boy into his box stall. After Diamond was hitched at a feed rack, they hurried down the main street looking for the ranch car. Charlie was eager to tell his father and mother that he had found Trey Spot. They found the car parked in front of Bailey's store. Inside the store they found his parents looking at a showcase of men's shirts. Grandby Carter turned and smiled at Ellen. Ann laid aside a shirt she had been looking at.

"We found Trey Spot. She's entered in the big race." Charlie spoke so loudly that a number of customers stopped to look at him.

His father tossed the shirt he had been holding back on the counter. His mother just looked at Charlie, scarcely believing what she had heard.

"Where is she?" Grandby Carter asked.

"A Navaho boy has her. They have worked the brand over to a Bar Box," Charlie explained.

His father frowned. "They have their nerve bringing her here after stealing her."

"I don't think they stole her," Charlie said. "I think they caught her in a horse drive."

"We'll go right out and get her," his father said. "She must be in bad shape if a Navaho has been riding her."

"She's slick and trim." Charlie grinned broadly. "And she has a golden filly."

"Golden Boy's filly?" his mother asked.

"Yes."

"This boy knows you recognized her?" Grandby Carter asked.

"Yes. I talked to him about her."

"Then he'll skip out with her if we don't act fast."

Charlie shook his head. "He won't skip. I told him to ride her in the big race."

His father frowned. "Well, she's your horse, son."

"I'll give him two of my mares for Trey Spot and the filly," Charlie said eagerly.

"I think that is a fine way to handle it," his mother said.

Grandby Carter shook his head resignedly. "They rework a brand and keep a horse they could easily trace to her owner; they're horse thieves." He smiled. "Only I'm outnumbered again. I'll just tend to my shirt buying." He turned back to the counter.

Ellen and Charlie left the store. Ellen looked up and down the street. "If Dean would just come along with his car we wouldn't have to walk home."

"I like to walk," Charlie said, and tried not to let his voice show how he felt.

They walked up the main street and along a shady residential avenue until they came to Judge Hansen's house. As they reached the front steps, Ellen paused. "Let's sit out here for a while," she suggested.

She sat down on the top step with Charlie beside her. He was sure she had something on her mind so he waited for her to speak. Ellen looked at him, then clasped her hands in her lap.

"Your mother told me how you licked the bum leg," she said. "I think it was wonderful."

Charlie was embarrassed. "It wasn't so tough," he said. "And I'll lick the limp, too."

"I know you will," Ellen said.

Charlie looked at her and suddenly started grinning. She looked so worried and fussed. Then she laughed and jumped to her feet.

"I just wanted you to know." And before he could answer she added, "Let's raid the refrigerator, I'm starved."

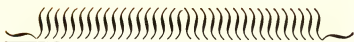
There was no one at home. They went into the kitchen and helped themselves to cold chicken and milk. When they had finished eating they went out and sat on the step again until Harriet arrived, escorted by a tall boy wearing riding boots and a new silk neck scarf. Harriet waved a gaily painted Kewpie doll.

"We've been at the carnival," she announced.

"Hello, Andy," Charlie greeted the tall boy.

"Hello, Charlie." Andy cast a glance back toward the gate as though considering a bolt for the street, but Harriet caught his hand and pulled him into the house.

Charlie smiled at Ellen. They sat looking out into the street without saying anything at all.



20. *The Big Race*

GRANDBY had mentioned the news about Trey Spot to a number of his friends. He had told them that the mare would be in the big race. Interest picked up at once. There was a keen difference of opinion as to what would happen. Those who had seen the golden stallion were inclined to back him, while others, remembering how easily the mare had won the year before, were willing to place their bets on her. The Bar L boys took all bets up to the limit of their finances, and they bet on Golden Boy.

At a mile only good horses could be expected to bid for top honors. A horse had to have bottom, as the boys put it, to go the distance. There were a number of entries whose owners weren't talking much about their horses, but who had high hopes. Among the Lazy Y entries were two which they were backing heavily. The

Circle M had one they were putting their money on. It wasn't a Bar L race by any means.

Shorty and Grandby helped Charlie saddle Golden Boy and get him ready for the race. When Shorty showed up Charlie grinned at him.

"I hear you've retired and plan to settle down," he said.

"Who, me?" Shorty pushed his hat back and scowled.

"You and Mrs. Garrity," Charlie said.

Shorty shoved his hands into his pockets. "I jest left a peaceful poker game. No female woman gets a brandin' iron on me."

Grandby chuckled. He had noticed that Shorty had been squiring Mrs. Garrity the first day but had not been seen in public at all since.

"I been holed up," Shorty explained sourly. "Like a gopher."

But Shorty rode with them to the track, risking a meeting with the widow.

"It's risky," he said as he rode beside Charlie. "But I'll keep an eye peeled."

The track was a half-mile oval, which meant that the horses would go two laps to complete the race. The track was dusty and well plowed up in places by bucking horses and wild steers. As they rode up the track, past the crowd at the starting line, Charlie looked for Ellen but he did not see her.

There was considerable commotion near the starting line, where the judges and the official starter and a couple of cow hands were trying to finish the drawing for places. Charlie got his shotgun wad with a number on it. Golden Boy had drawn third place from the rail.

He held the stallion back and waited, his eyes wandering down the track looking for Dean's convertible. Ellen had planned to come with Dean.

Bekis arrived with Trey Spot and drew the rail. Charlie grinned and waved to the young Indian. The Navaho lifted a hand in response. Then Charlie saw the yellow convertible pull in close to the track. Ellen was leaning back with her hands clasped behind her head. Dean wasn't paying any attention to the horses at the starting line; he was giving all his attention to Ellen. Charlie would have waved at her but at that moment she turned her head and began talking to Dean.

"Get them straightened out!" the starter shouted.

The horses were straightened out. None were difficult to handle because the entries were all well-trained range horses. Charlie held Golden Boy back. The starter waved him up into line.

"I'll start from here," Charlie called.

"Take the handicap if you want to." The starter was rather relieved because he wasn't sure the big stallion would behave if he were crowded too close to the other horses.

Charlie leaned forward and patted Golden Boy's neck. He had spent hours training him to get away fast, and Golden Boy had been taking a handicap start. But with the crowd and the cars all making a noise, and with surroundings so different, Charlie wasn't sure what Golden Boy would do. The stallion pranced and jerked his head up and down, his eyes rolling nervously. The starter lifted his Stetson and held it for a moment, then brought it down.

The horses broke and raced away, their riders whooping and swinging their quirts. Golden Boy watched them go for a full five seconds before he broke and raced after them. He gave voice to a shrill cry as he leaped forward. With a herd of horses out ahead of him he felt a wild urge to run.

He closed the gap quickly. The horses ahead were bunched at the first turn. Trey Spot was flying along with Bekis lying low on her neck talking to her, but not using a quirt. As they whirled into the turn and headed down the far side Charlie began to look for an opening to shove Golden Boy through. The opening came on the far turn, but Golden Boy did not move up. He was satisfied to bring up the rear where a good herd leader belonged.

Charlie urged him and coaxed him, but Golden Boy just raced along behind the bunched horses. He even made a pass at a piebald who was dropping back. The piebald moved up again at once. Charlie tried the quirt, but Golden Boy paid no attention to it.

As they swept into the stretch in front of the grandstand Charlie began to see why the Lazy Y had extra horses in the race. Trey Spot was boxed in while one of the Lazy Y geldings was moving out in front, pushed closely by the Circle M entry, a lanky roan. Charlie watched Trey Spot anxiously. She would need four lengths' lead when she reached the final stretch where she would begin to weaken, but she wouldn't get it if they kept her penned in on the rail.

Charlie pulled Golden Boy over into the dust back of the Lazy Y rider who was holding a position beside Trey Spot. As the stallion swung in on the heels of the

gelding he screamed a warning and laid back his ears. Golden Boy did not like geldings. The rider glanced back and saw the stallion coming. He swung his horse wide, forgetting what he was supposed to be doing.

Bekis saw his chance and moved Trey Spot out and into the open where she fled down the track, passing the Circle M roan and coming up with the Lazy Y horse. Charlie grinned. He might not get Golden Boy to quit chasing the field, but at least he had helped Trey Spot.

As they hit the next turn Charlie was disgusted with his mount's actions, but he wasn't downhearted. Trey Spot was moving out in front. In the stretch she pulled away to a five-length lead. The roan and the Lazy Y gelding were fighting it out for second place. Golden Boy galloped along effortlessly, eating a lot of dust but not minding it. He had plenty of breath to waste on loud whinnies.

As they went into the next turn Charlie's heart sank. He wasn't going to be able to budge Golden Boy out of last place. The stallion wouldn't even let the fagged piebald drop back and quit. Charlie looked across at Trey Spot flying along in the lead. He was glad she was out there, but he wanted Golden Boy up there with her, making a race out of it. Then an idea hit him. He raised his head and blasted a shrill whistle between his teeth. He might be able to get Trey Spot to coax Golden Boy through the bunched horses.

He whistled a second time and heard Trey Spot's whinny. Golden Boy heard it too and his head came up. He answered lustily, then started moving up. He slipped past the bunched horses easily and was soon neck-and-neck with the roan and the Lazy Y gelding who were now pulling up on Trey Spot. He passed the

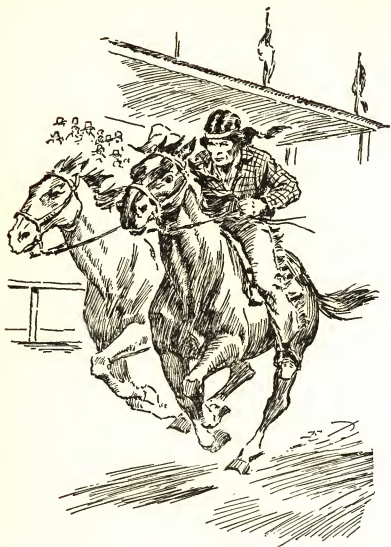
pair and raced after Trey Spot. He had only a length to gain because that was all the lead she had left. They swung into the last stretch with Golden Boy galloping along close at the mare's flank and making no effort to pull up beside her.

Charlie glanced back and saw the geldings swing wide for the final sprint. They looked fresh and strong while Trey Spot was straining now and failing fast. They were coming up on the outside in a final rush, their riders using their quirts to get one last burst of speed out of their mounts. Charlie knew they would pass Trey Spot before she could reach the finish line.

Golden Boy also seemed to realize Trey Spot was letting down. He reached over and nipped her sharply. She leaped ahead and he nipped her again on the rump. Trey Spot responded as she had when he was driving her long ago during the horse hunt. She put on a stretch that pulled her away from the geldings. Golden Boy stayed beside her, nipping her flanks when she slackened her pace. He sent her across the finish line two lengths ahead of the roan and the Lazy Y horse, while he himself was less than a length behind.

The crowd roared its approval. They were all horsemen and knew the ways of a wild stallion. Golden Boy had put on a show they would talk about for years. When Bekis pulled Trey Spot in and trotted her back to the judges' stand Golden Boy was at her side prancing proudly, shaking his head and snorting as though he hadn't just been in a grueling race, but had been playing a pasture game. There was nothing Charlie could do to stop him. He shared her honors when she stepped up to receive the winner's ovation.

Shorty and Grandby Carter came to Charlie's rescue



Golden Boy answered lustily



then started moving up

and they got Golden Boy away from Trey Spot. Ann Carter rode up on Diamond. She pushed to Charlie's side, her eyes shining, but there was so much noise from the crowd that Charlie could not hear what she said. Shorty was grinning broadly, even though Golden Boy had cost him a month's wages.

Charlie looked for Ellen but the yellow convertible was gone. He wondered if they had waited to see the finish of the race. Bekis came through the crowd on foot. Willie was caring for Trey Spot. He looked up at Charlie and smiled.

"I had to ride her neck to keep him from biting me," he explained. "It was the way he drove her on the desert when we caught her."

"I didn't do much of a job of handling him," Charlie said. "He did all of the handling himself."

"What will you do about the mare?" Bekis asked.

"She is my favorite horse, outside of Golden Boy," Charlie said. "I want her and the colt, but I'll give you two good mares in place of them. You can pick them from my string."

"I have talked with my father," Bekis said. "I would like two mares of my own. My father says you are to have the mare and the little one."

"And you are to keep the prize money. I have told the judges to give it to you." Charlie held out his hand. Bekis stepped close to Golden Boy and they shook hands. Then the young Navaho turned and walked away through the crowd toward the judges' stand.

Charlie rode to the barn and stabled Golden Boy. He took a long time rubbing the horse down. He wasn't in a hurry because he had nothing planned for that eve-

ning. Ellen was probably out riding with Dean, and he didn't want to go to a dance that evening, anyway. He decided not to go to the Hansen home for supper. He would eat at one of the crowded cafés.

He put away the comb and brush and dusted off his hat and clothes. Golden Boy had kept him in a haze of dust all through the race and he needed to clean up, but shrugged the idea off. Stepping around a pile of baled hay stacked near the door he found himself face to face with Ellen. She was carrying the Western hat she had worn at the show and her hair shone in the evening sunlight.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello." Charlie showed his surprise. "I thought you were riding with Dean."

She tossed her head. "He can find plenty of girls who like cars better than horses," she said. Then she stepped into the barn. "I want a word with Golden Boy. Dean drove off without even waiting for the horses to come back to the judges' stand." She laughed suddenly. "It was grand the way Golden Boy made her win. Everyone is talking about it."

"He sure pushed her across ahead of my entry," Charlie laughed.

They walked back to the box stall and Ellen petted Golden Boy. He was too busy with his oats to pay much attention to her, but she rubbed his neck and scratched between his ears, then they left him.

Walking down the street, Charlie said, "You won't want to miss the dance tonight."

Ellen laughed. "I want to get my things together. I told Mrs. Carter I'd go back to the ranch with her to-

morrow if you wouldn't let me ride back with you." She glanced at him, then away quickly. "But if you want to go to the dance we'll go."

"I don't want to go," Charlie said.

They walked along in silence for a half block, then Charlie said, "I was going to grab a hamburger and not bother the Hansens tonight."

"Swell. I'll have a hot dog with you."

They crossed the street to a hamburger and hot-dog stand and perched on stools at the counter. A red-faced cook grinned at them. "Some show you put on, Charlie," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Hot dog and hamburger," Charlie said.

"Mustard and onion?"

"Everything," Ellen said, and smiled at Charlie.

"The works," Charlie said, and smiled back at her.





21. *Sunrise*

SHORTY stood in the door of the saddle house and peeped cautiously up toward the house, then he eased himself out of the door and crossed over toward the barn. Charlie saw him coming and wondered why he was in such a hurry. He looked past Shorty toward the house and a broad grin spread over his face. Grandby Carter was holding open the door of the Buick and Mrs. Garrity was getting out, her ample person filling the car door.

"Well," Charlie remarked, "I see we're to have a cook again this summer."

Shorty slumped down on a staple keg and got out the makings of a cigarette. After he had rolled it he stared at it glumly and shook his head.

"Reckon I'll see a heap of the outdoors this summer," he said. "Be out from sunup to sundown."

"You could be kind but firm." Charlie grinned. He

knew the Widow Garrity would not be easily rebuffed, and that Shorty lacked the nerve to stand up to her.

Shorty went out and got his horse. He rode away at a fast pace. Charlie went to the corral and seated himself on the top pole. After a while Ellen appeared in her riding outfit. Charlie watched her as she swung down the path toward the corral. She was slim and graceful even when walking in riding boots. A gust of wind blew her hat back. It hung by the chin strap while her hair ruffled around her face. She waved to Charlie.

"Hi, cowboy!" she called.

Charlie jumped down off the fence. Before he realized it, he had held out his hands to her. It was a foolish thing to do; she didn't need any help and they had met at breakfast. Anyway, they never shook hands. He felt warm color flushing his face. Ellen looked up at him and he saw that her cheeks, too, were flushed. She laughed and let him take her hands. He spread them wide and managed to find words to hide his real feeling.

"My, but you look nice this morning."

"Thank you, sir," she said, and made a little curtsy.

Charlie turned quickly and hurried into the corral to get Trey Spot and Diamond. He was riding Trey Spot again because she was easier to get along with than Golden Boy. Golden Boy had been given a band of mares. He was a range stallion now, king of the horse pasture. Trey Spot's filly was in the lot where the colts were kept.

Charlie had made a firm resolve. Before the day's ride was over he would tell Ellen how he felt about her. He was fairly sure she felt the same way he did, but he

couldn't go on just taking it all for granted, he had to tell her and then they would be engaged and when they were through college . . . His thoughts broke off as she took Diamond's reins. She stood for a moment in her slim jodhpurs and checked shirt, her eyes bright and excited.

"Something is going to happen today," she said. "I can feel it."

Charlie grinned. "I hope you'll like it."

"We'll go by way of the little pasture and see the filly," Ellen suggested.

They stopped at the gate to the colt pasture. The youngsters were romping on a grassy hillside. Trey Spot's filly was a trim little horse with a fine head and slender, well-shaped legs. When the colts broke and ran she raced ahead of them.

"You're supposed to find a name for her," Charlie reminded Ellen.

"I'm working on it," Ellen said. "She can't be given just any name."

They rode on up the slope and passed above the horse pasture where Golden Boy watched over the ranch mares. The stallion was standing on high ground, alert and watchful as though there were no protecting fence. So far as he was concerned the mares were wild horses and needed his protection and leadership. They paused to watch the herd. Charlie looked down at the horses, then at Ellen. He would tell her at the first stop when they were out of the saddle, resting.

The first stop was made beside a clear stream in the shade of an aspen tree. Diamond and Trey Spot stood cropping grass. Ellen sat down and Charlie lay on the

grass beside her. They looked over the round foothills where the wind billowed the grass. He didn't know just where to start.

It was Ellen who began talking. She talked about the picnic Ann Carter was planning and about the fuss she'd have with her folks when they arrived and wanted her to stay in town with them. Charlie didn't say anything, but he looked up at her, smiling.

"Your mother says the doctor thinks now that he took her trouble too seriously," Ellen said. "But she still won't be able to ride much."

This wasn't news to Charlie, and suddenly he realized that Ellen was just talking to be talking. The hand beside his was moving restlessly in the grass. He placed his own hand over it and sat up. His heart was beating wildly. Ellen looked at him and the words she was saying drifted off into nothing. He read the excitement in her eyes and pressed her hand hard, then he freed it and put his arm around her. She moved close against him.

"Ellen," he said in a husky voice, "I've wanted to tell you something for a long time."

She nodded and reached down to pull the head off a little mountain daisy. "It will be a long time, Charlie," she said softly. "College for both of us and then—" Her voice trailed off.

"Then we'll—we'll—" Charlie couldn't finish what he intended to say.

"I guess so." She slipped out of the circle of his arm and stood up. "Yes, I've known for a long time I wanted to live on the Bar L."

Charlie got to his feet. He felt happy clear through,

but he felt peaceful, too, because it had all happened as he had wanted it to happen. Ellen caught up Diamond's reins. Charlie turned to Trey Spot. They were both nervous and a little afraid, but each was sure the future would be wonderful, just as wonderful as today had been.











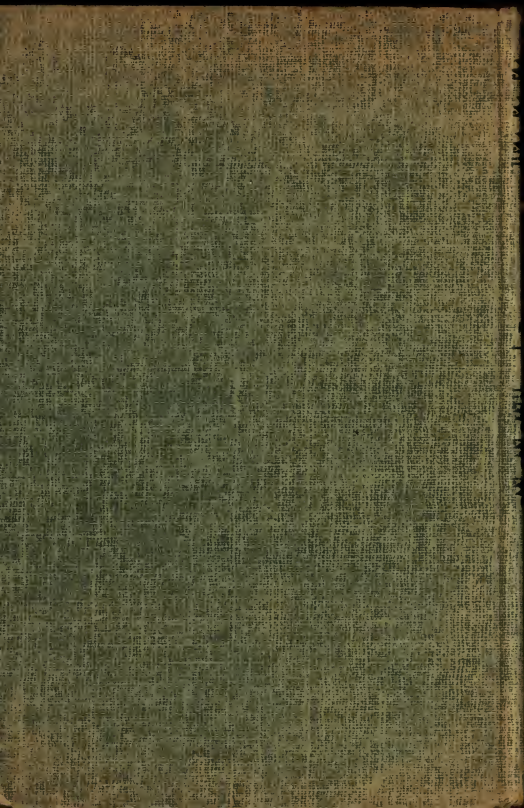
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